

# Birthright



by  
Rick Partlow

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## Chapter One

*TCN News Instell Report, Dateline: 12 November, 2,215, Commonwealth Standard.*

*Reports continue to trickle in from the Aphrodite colony of an armed uprising by the so-called Predecessor Cultists, who profess to be preparing humanity for the return of the Predecessors, or Ancients: the mysterious race whom many believe is responsible for the construction of the Martian Face and whose relics have been found at sites on a handful of worlds throughout the Cluster. Speculation on the nature of the Ancients has continued since the discovery in the early Twenty-First Century of the map of the wormhole jumplinks carved into the side of the Edge Mountain on Hermes, which spurred the initial phase of interstellar colonization. Though no physical remains or pictorial representations of the Predecessors have been discovered, these cults insist that they were humanoids who were responsible for genetically engineering and "seeding" the races of our cluster, who created the jumplinks for our use as a kind of birthright and who will someday return from their self-imposed exile to judge the progress of us, their "children."*

*Cultists on Aphrodite have reportedly armed themselves with military weapons and attempted to take over communication facilities, just the latest in a chain of violence which has included riots on Earth in Capital City and New Bombay. On dozens of Commonwealth colonies, however, and on Earth itself, the Predecessor Cults continue to grow in popularity, particularly among young adults and disaffected veterans of the War with the Tahni. Though Commonwealth sources refuse to comment, it is rumored that the Criminal Investigations Division of the Patrol Service is working in conjunction with planetary constabularies to crack down on the cultists...*

"The Ancients shall return! Repent your arrogance, oh humanity, and seek their wisdom!" I saw the spittle fly from the woman's lips as she yelled her message out at the passers-by on Harristown's main street. She wore the polychromatic robes of a priestess in the Predecessor Cult, and, from the amplification of her voice, she either had surgically augmented her vocal chords or was wearing some kind of concealed public-address hardware.

Her acolytes---a pair of heavily-altered males, their muscles augmented with cloned tissue almost to the point of absurdity---stood naked behind her, arms raised toward the sky. They were chanting some kind of mantra, but I couldn't quite make out the words. I didn't particularly care except that they'd interrupted the newsfeed I'd been auditing over my neurolink.

I brushed past them, only noticing them at all to be sure they didn't notice me. Today it was my job to not be noticed, which was not too hard in Harristown at Night---not anymore. I remember back when I was a kid, back before the war, when Canaan was nothing more than a quiet, religious agrocolony. Back then, you could walk down Penn Avenue and not see one person you didn't know, or any buildings more than two stories tall.

Now...now it was built up so high you couldn't see the stars, and the population in the city had swollen to nearly a million. It wasn't home anymore; not to me.

I shook my head. No time for that now. I had a job to do.

There was a cold rain falling, and I fastened up the front of my jacket to keep it from dripping down my collar. The weather was always bad this time of year, but nowhere near as bad as it used to be. Canaan has a rotation period of 125 Standard Days, and the temperature differential that slow turn created used to make the Night a hellish period of huge storms and cold, hurricane-force winds. But the Corporate Council changed all that with the reflectors they put in orbit after the war.

Now the Long Night was a series of little nights, interspersed with

twelve-hour periods of unnatural neon "days." It made things run more efficiently at the new iridium mines, and most of the influx of postwar colonists liked it. Of course, it was slowly killing the planet's native ecology, but what did that matter to Corporate executives twenty light-years away? The imported, genetically-engineered flora and fauna were doing fine.

Stop it! I snarled at myself. You get distracted, you could wind up as extinct as any of those native plants, Mitchell.

The tiny, prewar sector of Harristown quickly gave way before me, replaced by the boxy multistory Corporate Housing Projects, where the mineworkers and those who preyed on them lived. The prefab structures had started out as shiny and new as any other metal toy, but had gone downhill about an hour after the migrants moved into them. Now they were shitholes, infested with drug dealers and drug users, ViR addicts, skingangers, rippergangs, and various other manifestations of human refuse. Wise places to avoid if you had a choice, but I'd made mine a few years ago.

Finally, there was the place I wanted. It looked much like any other project building, but for the Skinners lounging on the front steps, flaunting the bionic streetware that gave the gangs their name. It wasn't bad enough that the sick, soulless bastards actually had their own limbs amputated and sold them to the underground organ banks. No, they financed their little rebellion against organic life by Ripjacking: kidnaping transients and migrants, slicing them into their most valuable pieces and selling them off. It didn't matter that cloning technology had made organ banks obsolete---not everyone

could afford to have a replacement limb or organ assembled from cloned tissue. So the market was there and these were the suppliers. None of them carried any obvious weapons, but that meant nothing with all the cybernetics crammed into their bodies.

I started up the steps but, predictably, one of them rose to block my way. He wasn't particularly big, and I was sure he was an Offworlder---the 1.65 Gravities on Canaan tends to produce big people---but that didn't make him less dangerous. His arms were bare metal bionics, not even concealed with synthskin, and his head was shaven, revealing the input jacks set behind each ear and at the base of his skull. The sockets had become *de rigueur* for most technical work in the last few decades, but most of the skingangers used them to feed their addiction to black market Virtual Reality programs, or to illegally penetrate central data systems---or just to look tough.

"Wrong place, Norm," the Skinner scowled, the ruby oculars of his eye replacements gleaming with menace. Norm...short for Normal Human. It had recently become an insult.

"I want to see Cutter," I told him quietly. Act too timid and he'll waste my time taunting me. Act too cocky and I'll waste my time killing him.

"Maybe Cutter not want see, Norm," he cackled in the abbreviated idiom popular with the Skinners.

"Maybe Cutter want see this." I pulled a credit spike from my sleeve pocket, tossing it at the jackhead.

Snatching the spike out of the air, he plugged it into the socket behind his right ear. His natural eye widened at the five K in

corporate scrip the plastic-encased crystal lattice represented. He slowly pulled the spike out and began tossing it up and down appreciatively in his palm.

"Dangerous carrying here, Norm," he warned me. "Man get killed."

I snatched the spike from the air above his hand, and, while he was still blinking in disbelief, I stepped past him up the stairs to the door. He grabbed my right wrist in a bone-crushing, servo-assisted grip, and must have been very surprised when it didn't break. Enough of this. I spun into a back kick that caught him in the solar plexus, throwing him off the stairs a good five meters out into the street. He tumbled head over heels, finally coming to a stop on his back, wheezing.

The other Skinners gaped at me, the ones equipped with thermal vision scanning me for bionics, but not finding any. I turned and stepped through the door, rubbing at the red marks on my wrist. The inside of the project was no improvement on its exterior. Canaan wasn't a very urban colony, not like Eden or Aphrodite; but this place was at least a century out of date, and it looked like it hadn't been cleaned since it was built. The hallways were littered with trash, splattered with urine and feces, and crowded with jackheads high on Kick---synthetic endorphines---and hooked into ViR streetware that directly stimulated the pleasure centers of the brain. I was as out of place there as I would have been in a Corporate Council board meeting, but no one tried to stop me. I knew where I was going, and that's usually half of not being questioned.

Down the main hallway, right turn into a narrower side corridor, down a short set of stairs to a heavy, reinforced door. I thumbed the

doorbell, and a scanner lowered from the ceiling to look me over. I half-expected a trapdoor to fall open beneath my feet and swallow me up, but instead the heavy portal unlatched with an audible "click," silently swinging open.

It revealed another short, dark passage which led into a large, dimly-lit room, filled with operating tables, surgical equipment, diagnostic computers and various medical scanners. Standing in the middle of it all was a tall, thin...well, I guess you could still call him human.

His cranium had been expanded to handle the cloned brain tissue implants, and the superchargers that provided that extra tissue with the needed oxygen protruded from the sides of his neck. One of his eyes was cybernetic, built for microsurgery, and its housing extended to the bionic ear on that side: a flat, metal amplification disc. There was the standard trio of input jacks, plus one on each wrist...and then there were his hands. They were such a combination of flesh and cybernetics that I wasn't sure what was natural and what wasn't. The fingers were unnaturally long and slender, even for an Offworlder, and inlaid cybernerves crisscrossed them, augmenting his sense of touch. The forefingers looked to be removable, probably to mount surgical instruments.

What the hell kind of a sex life did this guy have?

"Mr. Mitchell, I presume," he giggled, his voice high-pitched and annoyingly squeaky. "Or should I say, 'Constable Mitchell?'"

"Say whatever you like, Cutter," I told him. "As long as you get around to telling me why you called me here."



"That was some little show you put on outside," Cutter went on, shuffling from his theatrical center-stage position to a new one in front of a bank of scanners. "As I could not detect any bionics through the thermal scanners out front, I took the liberty of running an MRI on you as you entered the building." He grinned, a truly horrible sight. "Would you like to see it?"

"I didn't come here to play games. Do you have the information or should I just take my spike and leave?"

"Oh, we'll conduct our business, Constable," he said, wagging his head. "You'll have your dreary little arrest. But this..." He hit a control and a hologram sprang to life above the machine. "This is truly fascinating."

The hologram was a full body shot of me, taken as I walked in the entrance corridor---nothing too prepossessing. Short-cut sandy hair and blue-grey eyes on a broad, square-jawed face, panning down to a thick neck and wide upper torso with arms just a bit disproportionately large. Center of gravity was low, with thick legs and a compact build overall at about a meter-seven. A typical Canaanite male, on the outside.

Then the Magnetic Resonance Imaging melted away the holo's skin, revealing the computer-enhanced muscle, bone and organs within, layer by layer, and the illusion of normality ended.

"Forget the bone laminants and the muscle augments, and even the subdermal armor," Cutter said with a dismissive wave of his hand, "even though they're all made of something my scanners can't identify except that it's *alive*. Never mind the fact that all of your vital organs

are about half-again as large as they should be, and let's not even mention those *extra* organs. Even though all of those combined might raise a few eyebrows, I suppose that someone, somehow might bring together the *millions* of credits and the team of Corporate surgeons and geneticists it would take to install that kind of wetware.

"No, the really incredible stuff is all in your head." He giggled at the play on words. "Not the sonar system in your ear canals, or the thermal-imaging lens implants *behind* your corneas, or even the pressure equalization device in your sinus cavity. No, the truly amazing thing is that you have what I can only describe as the most sophisticated implant computer I've ever encountered." He jabbed a metal finger at the noticeable lump wrapped around my brainstem in the holographic display. "We're talking about biological microprocessors with more storage capacity than a human brain, hooked up through a neurolink with an encrypted microwave transceiver that looks like it could bounce a signal off of a satellite."

He steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "Now, I realize that this planet isn't exactly the scientific hub of the Commonwealth, but I haven't seen anything like this in a decade of street surgery; and I don't think the Office of the Planetary Constabulary has pockets deep enough to foot the bill for something so sophisticated that Military Intelligence has probably never heard of it."

"Enough of the anatomy lesson," I snapped, my patience wearing thin. "Look, Cutter, we could just as easily have conducted our business through the Net, like we usually do. Why did I have to bring the money here in person?"

Cutter seemed to consider his words carefully, leaning up against the scanner.

"Forgive me, Constable," he said, actually seeming contrite, "but sometimes information is more valuable to a man in my position than money. Let's make a new arrangement. You want the location of the weapons transfer, I'll give it to you---names, places, everything." He retrieved a plastic data spike from a pocket in his loose grey shirt and tossed it to me. "*Gratis*. You may keep your department's precious funds. What I want is...you."

"Beg pardon?" I squinted at him dubiously.

"I've heard rumors about you, Constable Mitchell," he said.

"Rumors about things you did in the war...about something called 'Omega Group.'"

I didn't let the surprise show on my face, but it was there, and palpable, and he knew it. It was no secret with the Locals what I'd been during the war, but there weren't too many people alive that knew the Omega codename. If he'd said "the Glory Boys," I might've had to kill him right there.

I saw amusement in Cutter's natural eye as he gauged my reaction. I wondered just where he'd managed to dig up that name.

"And?" I said.

"You probably picture me as some kind of sociopath, a megalomaniac misanthrope who wishes to lose his humanity like those cretins in the outer hall." Yeah, I reflected. That was about the size of it.

"I know," he continued, "it would be hard for you to imagine such a

pitiful creature having normal human attachments, but even one in my particular business finds himself owing debts to others which can't be repaid through a simple transfer of funds. I owe such a debt for a favor done long ago."

"There's a point to this, right?" I sighed, beginning to get very uncomfortable with the whole situation.

"An old...acquaintance has returned to call in my debt," Cutter explained. "And I find myself unable to repay it alone. Perhaps it would be easier if she explained it herself." Cutter fell silent for a moment, his eye hazing over, and I guessed he was contacting someone over an implanted communicator.

It wasn't half a minute before a hidden door opened on a side wall, and a tall, long-legged human female strode through. I noticed three things immediately. The first thing was that she looked pretty damn dangerous. A black, leather flight jacket curled around her like an armored shell, in somber harmony with the grey fatigues and thick spacer's boots; and a heavy pulse pistol rode low on her right hip, counterweighted by a wide-bladed knife strapped to her left thigh. She was about my height, but the long, thin shadow she cast across the room at me seemed to make her more imposing.

The second was that she was very attractive, a slightly more difficult observation with all of the menacing trappings trying to conceal that fact. They couldn't, but by the attempt they accentuated the raw sexuality that wafted pheromonally from her. Short, dark hair framed a lean, tanned face inset with sparkling green eyes like some jeweled mask in a jungle temple. The athletic curve of her hips

flowed into the armor of her jacket in a stark contrast that would have driven a classical sculptor mad.

The third thing I noticed was that I was married.

"Constable, this is Kara McIntire," Cutter said by way of introduction. "Captain Kara McIntire, of late a corporate mineral scout."

"Expecting trouble, Captain?" I nodded at her gunbelt, not illegal here but kind of an unusual wardrobe item to wear to meet a cop.

"Isn't everybody?" Her eyes pierced me like a neutron beam, her voice hard but smooth.

"Kara," Cutter said, "has been the object of some unwanted attention recently."

"I assume we're not talking disgruntled creditors."

"Five attempts on my life in the past nine months," McIntire informed me tersely. "First one got my partner. Last one got my ship. I managed to get hired on a freighter that brought me here."

"Why the attention?" I wanted to know. "You stumble onto a field of iridium asteroids?"

"Nothing so common." She folded her arms, regarding me with a look of general disapproval.

"So who's after you?" I shrugged. "And just what do you think I can do about it?" I jabbed a thumb at Cutter. "Whatever your friend may have heard about my past, I'm just a small-time colony cop now. Try the Patrol Service...or the Council Security Force, maybe. *I've* found them to be particularly helpful." I wiped away a bit of sarcasm that had dripped down my chin.

"Oh, the Security Force has been very helpful all right," she said.

"They're the ones who fragged my Goddamned ship!"

Now, cynical as I was about the whole situation, I must admit that took me back a couple steps...and sparked my interest. The CSF had stomped on my toes more than once when it came to enforcing local laws on corporate property, and the thought of doing something that would piss them off appealed to me on an intestinal level.

"Tell me more," I invited, leaning against a surgical table.

"The first hitters were street trash---hired guns. They caught my partner by surprise, spread his brains all over a back alley in Hermes." I thought it interesting that the emotion evident in her voice when she told me about losing her ship was decidedly missing when she described the loss of her partner. "They weren't so lucky with me. I reported the whole thing to the local cops, but they wrote it off as a robbery attempt, or some kind of ripjack gang looking for a mark. I wasn't so sure---we were armed, and obviously spacers. Rippers usually try for easier targets. But they were dead, and there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do about it.

"I moved on to Inferno, to see if I could find myself a new partner, and a pair of local hitters came after me outside my hotel. This time, one of them got snagged still breathing, and, after a little friendly persuasion, he told me there was a price on my head. The word he got through the Net was five hundred K, corporate scrip."

I gaped at her in disbelief. "Jesus Christ," I blurted. "Who the hell would bankroll that kind of a price on a scout pilot?"

"Well, that's the real question, isn't it, Constable," she cocked an

eyebrow. "There aren't too many agencies or people who could. And all of them are powerful enough to have a pretty long reach. And that," she emphasized, "is what I want with you."

"I think I get it." I had to smile in spite of myself. "You can trust me because no one would bother to buy me off."

"Put bluntly," Cutter interjected with the answer, not seeming at all embarrassed over it.

"So why are you a target?" I asked. "And where does the CSF come in?"

"I have an idea of why." She scratched the back of her left hand unconsciously. "After I found out about the bounty, I contacted the Security Force. They promised to look into it, told me to go hole up someplace safe in the meantime, and to call and let them know where I was. And the local Investigator, he kept asking me if I had talked to anybody about a particular find my partner and I had made a few months back on the inner frontier."

"A big mineral deposit?" I guessed.

"More of an archaeological site. I thought it was a bit odd that he even knew about it...it was something pretty big, something the corporates would have kept quiet at first. But I had no reason to distrust him...then. So I found what I thought was a safe place, and called to let them know. Not thirty hours later, there was an attack on the place, this time by a professional hit team. I managed to get out, and got shot at again on the way to my ship. I got offplanet as fast as I could and contacted the Investigator. He told me that his comline had been tapped, that he would meet me at a place of my choosing

and take me to a safehouse. I chose the main spaceport at Eden---nice, safe place, out in public. I berthed my ship, grabbed a rifle and hid in an access tunnel across from the landing bay. And watched a Goddamned CSF assault shuttle blow my ship to scrap right in the fucking spaceport. Must have killed a dozen people."

"For an archaeological site?" I frowned. There was something I wasn't being told, something I didn't think she wanted to tell me. "We're obviously talking something more than clay pots and cave paintings here."

"Something's wrong," Cutter announced suddenly, head snapping around. "I've lost my feed from the outer sensors."

"Can you contact the Skinners on the porch?" I asked, sliding off the table. There was this familiar, queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, a soft buzz in my head.

He shook his head. "They're not answering."

"We've got to get the hell out of here," Kara drew her pistol. She didn't get two steps toward the hidden exit before the room's heavy, reinforced door blew off its frame with a concussion of superheated air and deafening sound that threw me back off my feet. A white rush of heat, light and noise enveloped me and I hit the floor hard with a whoosh of expelled breath.

I shook my head to clear the haze of brightness as several things began happening at once. Before my back hit the floor, my implant computer had shifted me into combat mode, powering up my muscle augments, sensor array and wired nerves, and hitting my system with several doses of natural and artificial stimulants. Everything seemed



to slip into slow motion, the lights flickering eerily from the damage the blast had done, the smoke from the explosion billowing centimeter by centimeter away from the ruined door frame and across the debris-littered floor.

As the air cleared, five hulking figures moved through the ruined doorway, dressed in what looked like honeycomb-ceramic hard armor, full visors covering their faces. Four of them were armed with compact, boxy pulse carbines, but the last one was lugging around the heavy tube of a single-shot plasma projector---an obsolete antiarmor weapon that I figured he'd used to blow the door. Before he could clear the entrance, I was up and in motion.

I had a gun under my jacket, but they were right on top of me, and, at this range, I was a better weapon than any gun. With a thought, the plastalloy blades mounted on the bones in my forearms extended through the synthskin flaps over my middle knuckles, and I threw myself at the lead hitter, twin pairs of talons slicing out. The laser-honed blades ripped through the sandwich ceramic armor over the man's torso, opened up his chest like a rib-spreader, and filleted his heart and lungs in a spray of blood that nearly blinded me.

He collapsed forward without a sound and I grabbed the laser carbine from his limp hands, swung his body around to use as a shield and opened fire at the others. The pulsegun's magazine fed hyperexplosive chemical cartridges into a combustion chamber and ignited them, pulsing each self-consuming shell's twenty kilojoules of heat energy through a semiconductor lasing rod at a rate of over 300 rounds per minute. The swath of laserpulses was clearly visible in the

smoke-engulfed room as a flashing crimson line that caught one of the muscular gunmen square in the visor, blowing his helmet apart in an explosion of vaporized cephalic fluid.

The surprise factor that had carried me that far ran out as the other two with pulseguns opened up in a panic, spooked by my sudden attack. Incandescent ruby flashes tore apart the corpse I held as a shield, a stray round catching me across the edge of my right thigh. I gave the smoldering body a one-handed toss towards the gunmen, falling forward as I cut across them with a long burst that drained the magazine.

The point-blank shots chopped across one of the lasershooters and the plasma-gunner, penetrating their chest armor and sending them dancing backwards with fist-sized holes blown in their torsos. But the last guy would have gotten me---I was in his sights and his finger was on the trigger---if a pencil-thin spear of light hadn't intersected his left temple, exploding his brain out the other side of his helmet. He jerked, keeling over backwards and I glanced around to see Kara McIntire crouched on the other side of the room, laser pistol extended outward and gripped with both hands.

What surprised me the most was how calm she was---my augment sensors, still in combat mode, told me her pulse, blood pressure, respiration and heart rate were still normal.

"Thanks." I scrambled to my feet, nodding gratefully to her. I didn't look at the wound in my thigh---my headcomp had already told me it hadn't penetrated my subdermal armor, and I just hated the sight of my own blood.

"Where's Cutter?" She picked herself up, looking around.

Cutter, as it turned out, was sprawled out beneath an operating table with a twelve-centimeter shard of duralloy from the shredded door impaled through the center of his skull. I didn't need any of my implants to tell me he was dead.

"Shit." The air seemed to go out of McIntire. "You poor, miserable bastard..."

"I'm sorry..." I started to say, but I was interrupted by an explosion from somewhere above us that shook the walls, punctuated by shouts, screams and the unmistakable crack-snap of discharging pulseguns. "We've got to get out of here now," I declared, retracting my wrist talons back into their housings. I yanked an ammo belt off of one of the dead assassins and slung it over my shoulder. "There's a lot more of them in the building, and they're probably watching the exits. Is there another way out of here?"

She nodded numbly. "This way."

*Deputy Chen*, I took the time to transmit over my neurolink as she led me to the concealed door she'd entered through. *Jason, this is Cal.*

*I'm here, Cal*, came his reply. *Trouble?*

*I'm hip-deep in shit, buddy. I'm in Cutter's chop-shop in Skintown and the place is full of Gomers with assault weapons. I need backup ASAP.*

*Jesus, Cal.* I could "hear" the concern in his voice. *I'll send the nearest patrol cars over there until we can get a STAT team out to you. You try to get clear, okay?*

*I'll do my best. See you soon.*

The secret door led to a narrow, darkened corridor---so dark I had

to use my night vision to go on. McIntire seemed to be moving quickly without hesitation, which I found curious---until my thermal filters caught the glowing stars of isotope power packs dotting her body at various key locations. She was either augmented or carrying prosthetics, or maybe both. Her skin temperature was normal, so the dermal material was either natural or cloned. Interesting, but it wasn't the most important thing I had to think about at the time.

The corridor went on for about fifty meters, twisting around a dozen corners, following a path between the walls, and the whole time we traversed it I could hear gunfire faintly echoing through the building. The invaders were being resisted by the Skinners, but I doubted they'd have much of a chance---most of them were stoned or lost in ViRspace. Maybe they could buy us some time.

The passage terminated in another concealed door, and McIntire was moving to open it when I stopped her with a light touch on the arm.

"What's on the other side?" I asked her quietly.

"Rear entrance hallway," she whispered. "There's a door to the basement---we can get out through the maintenance hatch to the sewers."

"Hold on." I concentrated my sensor net through the thin walls of the corridor, trying to discern if the hallway was occupied. They'd be covering the rear entrance---but from the inside or the out?

*Jason!* I transmitted.

*I'm here, boss.*

*What's the status on the patrol cars?*

*Approaching the building now,* he told me after a moment's hesitation.

*Tell them to do a fly-by of the rear exit, scan for Gomers around it.*  
There was another long pause, and I began to hear my pulse pounding in my ears.

*God's nuts! I heard Jason curse. The cars are catching heavy groundfire, boss. They've got to veer off, but it looks like all exits are heavily covered.*

*Thanks, Jase. Tell them to set down at a safe distance and set up observation for the moment.*

"Where's the basement door?" I asked McIntire.

She tapped the exit door. "Straight across the hallway from this."

"Here." I handed her the pulse carbine, pulling my Gauss pistol from its holster and checking its load. "I'm going to run for the door, draw any fire. You empty a clip, keep their heads down, then come after me."

*Jason, I transmitted. Do those patrol crews have a clear shot at the rear exit?*

*Wait one,* he told me. *Yeah, they could---but there's too many for them to take alone.*

*I need a diversion. Tell them to cut loose in five seconds and keep up a sustained covering fire for at least fifteen seconds.*

*Roger that, Cal. In five.*

It was actually more like eight seconds before I heard the loud "bangs" of impacting laserpulses, along with the shouts, commotion, running steps and the crack-snap of return fire down the hallway from

the passage exit. At ten seconds, I was in action.

Sliding the door aside, I shot across the hallway, taking in the scene around me in the second I was out in the open. There were seven of them at the end of the hallway, firing at my patrol crews across the street, none of them noticing me flying across the hall to crash into the basement door shoulder-first. I'd been taking a calculated risk that the door wasn't reinforced duralloy---if it had been, I would've looked pretty damn stupid bouncing off of it.

But my infamous luck held, and the door was cheap plastic, mounted with cheap aluminum fasteners in a cheap building. I slammed into it, knocked it off its hinges and carried it down a long set of stairs into the darkened basement, my stomach leaping into my throat as I rode the impromptu bobsled. The floor rushed up, seeking to meet my face, but I twisted in midair, introducing it to my feet instead.

I'd barely turned to head back up the stairs when Kara McIntire flew down them feet-first, landing in a crouch beside me. I didn't have a chance to compliment her on her acrobatics, because one of the invaders chose to stick his head through the basement doorway, and I chose to blow it off with a heavy, tungsten slug.

"Quick, the maintenance hatch." I took the laser carbine back and she headed deeper into the darkened clutter of the storage basement while I watched the door.

The body of the beheaded gunman was dragged back from the doorway, and I braced myself for the next attack. To give the Gomers credit, they attempted the right tactic---a grenade. A helmeted

gunman flashed into the open for only a fraction of a second, poised to throw the bomb, but it was enough time for me to squeeze off a burst of laserfire from the carbine.

I heard a muted scream and saw the grenade and his hand drop separately before I threw myself down. The explosion from the weapon blew out half of the wall to the left of the basement doorway, showering me and everything else in the front section of the basement with smoldering buildfoam and burning plastic. It would have blown out my eardrums if they hadn't been protected by the handy gadgets of the Fleet research boys, which was why I was able to hear McIntire when she yelled at me to "Come on!" from the back of the basement.

Brushing bits of hot buildfoam off myself, I jumped to my feet, danced carefully through the overturned boxes and furniture stored in the basement, and found my way to where Captain McIntire was lifting up a heavy alloy hatch imbedded in a corner of the basement floor.

She quickly dropped through it, and I followed her just as another grenade flew in through the gap in the wall. I landed ankle-deep in sewer water in the middle of a narrow, rounded tunnel walled with thick plasticrete, had to steady myself with a hand against the wall as the explosion from the grenade shook the ground.

*Cal, I heard Jason transmit as I followed McIntire, I'm coming in with six hoppers full of STAT squads---we're about thirty seconds out.*

*Hit it hard, I directed him. We're clear---we're in the sewer, heading for a street exit.*

*Gotcha, boss. We'll be looking for you.*

*You worry about the Gomers, I said. I can take care of myself.*

*I know that for certain. Take care, buddy.*

We were almost fifty meters down the tunnel when my sensor net picked up movement behind us. I pulled McIntire against the wall, aiming a one-handed shot back at the three bad guys coming down the ladder into the tunnel.

"Go!" I urged the scout captain, hosing the area around the ladder with a magazine-draining burst before taking off after her.

Reloading as I ran, I tossed the spent clip into the water and slammed the new one home. I ran hunched over, half-expecting to catch a burst in the back, but I must have hit something with the diversion fire. I caught up with McIntire quickly, despite the fact that she was sprinting at something near forty-five clicks an hour.

Whatever it was she had, it was pretty impressive.

At that speed, it took us less than a minute to make it to the first surface access hatch. McIntire threw herself up the ladder in a spray of water, grabbed the top rung with her left hand and swung her body upward, pumping both her legs up to slam the hatch out, then twisted her body through it with the grace of a gymnast.

I was about to follow her up when a hail of laserpulses cut through the air around me, blowing fist-sized chunks out of the plasticrete wall. I dropped prone, suddenly up to my ears and armpits in scummy sewerwater, and decided not to breathe for a few minutes. There were four of them, hugging the sides of the tunnel wall, visible to me on thermal as pale yellow and orange human shapes, decorated by the dull-red glow of overheated lasing rods. I tried to bring around



my carbine, but before I could get it in front of me they cut loose again, putting their shots low into the water around me. The multikilojoule pulses vaporized gallons of sewage, sending up gouts of steam that filled the tunnel, obscuring my thermal vision.

I dropped the carbine---the thickening haze around me would absorb too much light energy---and pulled my slug pistol, squeezing off a couple of rounds to keep them honest. I rolled to the right just before they poured a long burst into the spot where I'd recently resided. I was considering trying to take advantage of the steam to low-crawl down there and take them out when a grey-clad figure dropped into the tunnel beside me, hands filled with a heavy disruptor rifle. The armored, helmeted figure hosed a long burst down the tunnel, the maser beam only discernable by the crackling in the air as it cut through the steam. The targets of the beam found it a bit more substantial, as it exploded their cells from within, their ceramic armor worse than useless against it. If they'd had so much as an alloy-reinforced vest, it would have at least partially reflected the microwaves, but the ceramics actually acted as a kind of oven, trapping the heat from the maser until it blew their flash-boiled bodily fluids out through their chests. The maser caught three of them, and I targeted the last with a heavy, hypersonic slug from my Gauss pistol.

We waited for a moment, but heard and saw no more activity, and finally got to our feet. The grey-armored figure waved me up the ladder, covering the tunnel with his disruptor. I jumped through the hatchway, landed on the street above in a crouch, finally let myself take another breath...and instantly regretted it. I smelled like I'd been

face-down in a sewer---which, of course, I had.

Looking around, I found myself about three blocks down from Cutter's chop shop, standing in the middle of the street, surrounded by half-a-dozen grey-armored STAT troopers. The bulbous, dull-grey shape of a Constabulary hopper squatted in the background, blocking traffic, its belly fans idling with a low-pitched hum. A basic, no-frills, ducted-fan hovercraft, it had been obsolete since before the war, but we couldn't afford better. Kara McIntire was seated on the ground, bared to the waist while a medic checked what looked like a shrapnel wound on her shoulder. Fighting to keep myself from staring at her, I turned instead back to the access hatch, offering a hand up to the STAT troop who'd helped me.

Shifting his maser rifle to his left hand, he grabbed my wrist with his right and I lifted him clear of the hole, setting him up on his feet. He set down his weapon and pulled off his dark-visored helmet to reveal a mop of unruly blond hair, and a face that was a younger, slightly leaner version of mine.

"You okay, Cal?" Pete Mitchell, my little brother, asked breathlessly, wiping sweat and hair out of his eyes.

"Thanks to you, kid," I grabbed him in a quick hug, pounding him on the back.

"Damn," he pushed me away, holding his nose. "Did you have to go swimming in that toilet?"

"Don't get too sentimental on me, Pete," I laughed. "Where's Jason?"

"Still in the building." He waved at the chopshop down the street.

"He's supervising a final search-through, but he sent me down to make sure you were all right."

"Well," I shook my head, "Jase never was one for obeying orders. But then, neither was I."

I was about to try to contact Jason over my neurolink, but he beat me to the punch.

*Cal, he called me, do you read?*

*I'm here, Jason, I replied. Everything secured?*

*All locked down. We've got a total of twenty enemy casualties, about thirty-five dead Skinners and jackheads.*

*Holy shit, I shook my head. They put a whole platoon in there. Who the hell would go to that much trouble?*

*Yeah, well, there's something here you need to see, Cal.*

*Problem?* I frowned.

*Maybe.*

*I'm on my way.*

Leaving Pete in charge of directing the incoming ambulances, I brushed aside the medic's attempts to have a look at my leg and headed back up the street. The front of the building was a slaughterhouse, with four of the Skinners sprawled out, gaping holes blown out of them from multiple laser hits. The junctures of their cybernetic and organic parts lay obscenely exposed, charred and bloody muscle and bone melding to splintered ceramic and metal in an inhuman, gut-twisting marriage. Bodies littered the hallways--- more Skinners killed defending their turf, some literally torn apart, their Kick high keeping them going through the first few shots. ViR

addicts had been shot where they lay, still plugged into their machines, and the smell of burned flesh was thick in the air.

I had a sudden, powerful flashback to the war, to other fortresses on other worlds, littered with the bodies of Tahni soldiers...soldiers I had killed, staring up at me with accusing glares, blood pooled around the ruins of their throats. I had no illusions of what I had been or what I was: a killer, a cold-blooded assassin designed and built to spread terror in the enemy ranks.

There had been a dozen of us at the start, all of us little more than children, none older than twenty-one. The Frankensteins of Fleet Intelligence transformed us through the implants, the training, the psychological programming into the ultimate psychwar weapon---the living manifestation of the Tahni death spirits, their version of the bogeyman.

Clad in faceless, black combat suits, camouflaged by holographic fields, we would appear from thin air in the midst of the enemy camp and assassinate the highest-ranking officers, ripping their throats out with our talons and always, always spreading the fear. Sabotage, intelligence-gathering---those came later, gravy to the real meat of our existence. We were killers, first and last. It had taken a lot of work to pull myself back from that, to become a real person again, and that preprogrammed Killing Machine still lurked somewhere in the darkness of my soul, waiting for me to slip up so it could erupt screaming from my chest. I could hear its breath in my ear as I stepped over the mangled corpses, felt it clawing at the fringes of my psyche.

*The Machine is dead, I chanted silently. I am not the Machine.*

I nearly slipped in the blood pooled on the floor at the mouth of the rear exit hallway, and had to catch myself against the wall. The bulk of the STAT team was in there, gathered amidst nearly a dozen dead attackers, their corpses exploded from the inside by our maser weapons. Usually the disruptors were set to disable targets selectively by destroying hemoglobin in their blood and rendering them unconscious due to acute cyanosis---preventing enough oxygen from reaching their brains. But these guys were too dangerous to take the chance; for all we knew, they were augmented, with an alternate biomechanical method for delivering oxygen to their organs.

Jase was standing over one of the bodies, his sidearm dangling carelessly at his side. Jason Chen's height marked him as an Offworlder---he was very near two meters, and a bit under one hundred kilos---but he had lived on Canaan since he was ten, and had been my closest friend for that whole stretch of three decades. When we'd both returned after the War, it had seemed a natural thing for him to take the position as my chief deputy. His lean, pale face was twisted into a thoughtful frown as he nudged the fallen pulse carbine next to the corpse. His head turned as he noticed me walking up, and his frown deepened.

"You okay?" He was looking at the wound on my leg.

I shrugged it off. "Just a burn. You wanted to show me something?"

"Most of the Gomers were pretty fucked up by the disruptors," he said, gesturing at the exploded torso of one of the corpses. "This guy I

got with a shot from my pulse pistol," he nodded at the one at his feet.

I stepped around him to get a better look at the invader. Someone had stripped his helmet and chest armor off, revealing...*motherfuck*. Revealing an acolyte of the Predecessor cult. There was no mistaking it. Another, perhaps, might have had a similar swept-back hairstyle, and certainly there were many others with the cloned muscle implants and body restruct job. But the cosmetic holographic inlay of a stylized dual-star system across his chest was the signature of the Cult, a representation of the Alpha Centauri system, where the wormhole map was discovered.

"Goddamn," I said softly.

Jason nodded. "Exactly. We knew they were buying weapons; we just didn't know what for."

"But why now? They have a major deal set up in less than a week---why blow it all on an attack now?"

"Maybe there was someone here they wanted out of the way," Jase suggested. "Did Cutter give you any possible answer before they got him?"

I chewed my lip, thinking that yes, he actually might have given me the very reason.

"When you get through here," I told him, "find me at the station in New Jerusalem. There's someone you need to meet."

## Interlude: Damiani

Andre Damiani watched his opponent with predator's eyes. His adversary wasn't too imposing---only a centimeter or two over Damiani's meter-seven---but he was rock-solid beneath his red *gi*, and the crowd was on his side.

Andre didn't try to shut out the chanting, screaming throng of working-class Filipinos; instead he visualized their roar as the sound of a huge wave of energy that rolled through him, building up his *ki*, pushing him forward, urging him to launch an attack on his enemy. But he held back that rush of energy, waiting, looking for the compact, dark-skinned human male facing him to make the first move.

When he did, it was quick---a lightning-fast front snapkick that Damiani barely blocked. Andre tried to counter with a leg sweep, but his opponent hopped over it and scored with a jump sidekick that caught Damiani in the chest and knocked him on his back. Rolling to his feet, Damiani winced from the pain in his chest as the judge called a point for his opponent.

Still, he nodded in satisfaction. The simulator usually made things too easy. This scenario would be a challenge. The ring of onlookers around them grew louder, chanting his opponent's sim-name: "Munos!" they roared. "Munos! Munos!" Manilla was a rough crowd. Kyoto was much more sedate---the Japanese were so well-mannered.

Straightening his *gi*, Damiani squared off again to face Munos. He

knew the Filipino was fast, but still he waited for the simulation to make the first move. Munos edged forward and lunged into a high punch, but this time Andre ducked quickly inside to land a low punch to the man's midsection. Munos stumbled back, grimacing, and the white-clad judge awarded a point to Andre.

Damiani smiled. This simulacrum was fast and strong, but not terribly bright. Probably a "local hero" without much experience. He had Damiani in age and weight, but Andre was no newcomer to this game.

As they squared off once more, Damiani began receiving input from his neurolink, the tiny transceiver connected to the computer implanted in his skull, capable of squirting data directly into his brain.

*Mr. Director, we have the feed from the outpost.*

*Patch it through my link,* he ordered, an unfamiliar thrill of expectation coursing through him.

An image filled his vision, the data registering so fast that the real-time events around him seemed to freeze in space, and a sliver of his splintered consciousness was staring down from low orbit at the brown and blue hemisphere of a planet.

*Ship's log of the independent mineral scout, Springbok, Kara Lynn McIntire, Captain.*

Suddenly, the shot of the planet was overlaid by the spectral face of a young, dark-haired woman.

"TCC-5607 is a red giant," the woman's voice was even-toned and professional, "with only three remaining planets, of which this is the



middle. By all rights, there should be no habitable worlds left after the nova which formed the giant, but this planet, while lacking any higher forms of life, has a breathable atmosphere. My first mate, Evan Martinez, and I responded to a priority call from the Corporate Council mineral resources commission and responded immediately, arriving at this world within a month."

The view of the planet spiraled downward in a dizzying, time-accelerated shot from the starship's nose cameras as it came in for a landing on a narrow plateau, plumes of exhaust and clouds of dust finally obscuring the picture. With an abrupt, choppy transition, the feed shifted from the *Springbok's* exterior cameras to an unsteady view from a visual pickup mounted to the chest harness of McIntire's first mate---or, at least, he assumed so, since he could see the mineral scout captain standing before him, clad in ship's fatigues, a small respirator hanging around her neck.

"Though the air here is breathable," McIntire said for the benefit of the camera, "thanks mostly to a strange kind of lichen that seems to grow on every surface, it's substantially thinner than Standard and respirators may be necessary." The shot panned downward, revealing the sponge-like growth, a green film that carpeted the sandstone floor of the plateau.

"We're following the source of the transmission on foot into the mountains," McIntire narrated, the shot jiggling and bouncing as they set off up a narrow, rocky trail into the weathered range. Damiani impatiently signaled the program to fast-forward the playback, turning the bone-wearying ten kilometer trek into an absurd roller-coaster-

ride vision of blurred sandstone and purple sky. He slowed the progression just in time to witness the two mineral scouts follow the trail to its termination in a boxed-in draw, high in the side of the sandstone mountain...and a cave.

"We're...we're going in there?" Martinez asked, the view from his harness-mounted pickup frozen on the dark opening in the ruddy rockface.

"Cover our backs," McIntire snapped, pulling a flashlight off of her belt and stepping into the cave. Damiani could hear the first mate curse softly as a sidearm appeared in his hand at chest level.

The cavern, Damiani saw, was surprisingly big; its walls were farther away than McIntire's flashlight beam could penetrate. What he could see of the dry, flat rock of the cave floor was smooth and level---almost polished. It looked wrong. No natural phenomena could have carved that cavern out without any evidence of sedimentary formations, calcification or erosion. Something or someone had purposely carved it out, probably with a high-powered energy beam. The conclusion coursed through Damiani like an electric charge---though he had been aware for nearly a year of the details he was seeing, witnessing them first-person allowed him to feel the thrill of discovery once more.

As Martinez moved farther into the rocky amphitheater behind his captain, his camera revealed that the ever-present lichen had invaded the interior of the cave as well, making the footing treacherous---he nearly stumbled several times trying to walk in the wake of Kara's lightbeam. Apparently tired of gingerly shuffling around in the dregs

of McIntire's flashlight, Martinez took a moment to pull his own flashlight out of its pouch, his hands blocking the visual pickup for a few seconds as the device snagged on its restraints and he glanced down to free it, still moving forward...

Then suddenly he was falling, engulfed in Stygian darkness. A scream burst free of the man's lips and Damiani caught the glint of his pistol and flashlight flying from his hands. The fall seemed to stretch into infinity, and Damiani was certain that the Martinez would end up crushed on the rock below.

Yet almost magically the flight slowed and finally ceased, and all Andre could hear was the hiss of the first mate's breath in the impenetrable darkness. Then there was a soft, metallic clatter beside him, and the camera panned downward, its infrared optics showing both the pistol and the flashlight resting on the floor beside the man.

"Shit," Martinez hissed, bending to scoop them up, gripping the comforting curve of his pistol's grip in front of him.

The man seemed almost afraid to switch on his light, afraid of what he might see, but he slowly, hesitantly slid his thumb across the activation stud.

"Martinez!" Kara's voice came from somewhere high above him. "Martinez, where the hell are you?"

He didn't answer---Damiani imagined because he couldn't. The first mate's eyes and attention---along with Andre's---were fixed and frozen on the image before him, eerily illumined in the glare of his flashbeam.

"Sweet Jesus," Martinez murmured, using the barrel of his pistol to

cross himself.

The man hadn't fallen in a hole---he hadn't *fallen* at all. He had, as near as Damiani could decipher it from light-years away and days later, stepped into what could only have been some kind of antigravity transport tube which had deposited him deep inside the hollowed-out mountain, in the midst of a massive underground installation. It stretched out before him as far as his lightbeam could reach, an endless landscape of mechanisms that seemed more sculpture than machinery---liquid, flowing curves and vague, hazy edges that almost made Andre wonder if the things were really there.

Tall spires hovered precariously above him, while vaguely rotund mushroom shapes squatted in dark menace. Flickering shadows played teasingly at the edges of the camera's vision, and Damiani had the absurd thought that something more horrifying than he could imagine was about to burst from those tricks of the light and devour Martinez.

Though obviously reluctant to leave the imagined safety of the darkened corner he occupied, Martinez jerkily stepped forward, past the alien shapes and the imagined eldritch horrors they represented, across the smooth, polished floor toward a wall of what looked like glass, lit from within by a faint, white glow. As he moved forward, the shimmering glass seemed to go clear, revealing a hazily-defined image within it.

Martinez stopped in his tracks, frozen, immobile and silent as the image solidified within the clear material, looming a good head over him---it was bipedal and basically humanoid in shape, but definitely

not human. A long, angular face, cut with dark striations that Martinez wasn't sure were natural, stared at him with large, liquid eyes. A spiky, swept-back mane of what might have been hair stretched back from the oversized cranium, adding to the creature's already-considerable height.

Then something moved out of the shadows to appear suddenly beside him.

Abruptly free of his hysterical paralysis, Martinez screamed in terror, spinning around, bringing up his pistol...and Kara McIntire caught his arm, stopping his scream with a hand over his mouth.

"Oh, my God...," Martinez panted, hand going to his pounding heart, the pickup view shifting rhythmically with his out-of-control breathing.

"I found the opening," Kara explained, letting him loose and walking over to get a closer look at the creature. Hands on her hips, she scanned top to bottom the glassy wall, trying to peer through the haze at the tantalizingly visible shapes beyond, as if the one impossible being weren't enough for her. "Son of a bitch."

"What...," Martinez stammered. "What the hell is it?"

"I'll tell you what it is." A smile slowly spread across her face. "It's our ticket to the big time, Martinez. You and I are about to become part of history."

*End of transmission: 23 February, 2215, Commonwealth Standard Time.* The familiar, worry-lined face of Igor Costanza appeared out of the darkness of Andre's thoughts. *Sir, this was the original log of the scout team which discovered the outpost---we managed to obtain it from*

*the wreckage of the Springbok after its destruction on Inferno. As you can see, the woman McIntire may know entirely too much about this site. I've talked to your Chief of Security and we both agree on this. I know your plan was to allow the CSF and the Cultists to take care of her, but if she manages to get to the authorities...* He trailed off and Damiani paused the transmission.

As part of Andre's mind pondered the new data, and most of it watched his opponent---finally in apparent motion once again now that the computer linkfeed had ceased---a small fraction reflected that his father had been a very unfortunate man.

Gilbert Damiani had occupied the same position as Chairman of the Corporate Council that his son now did, but his life had been far different. He had spent most of it sequestered in boardrooms, buried in holographic computer readouts. Born too early for the genetic and hormonal treatments that had so extended Andre's life, he had also known nothing of the neurolinks and implant computers which allowed his son to remain active and gregarious, yet still preside over the largest business venture in human history.

The Filipino considered his next move. He thought he had Damiani all figured out as a counterfighter who would wait for him to make the first move.

*What about McIntire, sir?* Costanza's insistent voice asked him.  
*What should I tell your Security Chief to do about her?*

Damiani let loose the stored-up wave of *ki*, launching into a jump sidekick that caught his opponent on the tip of the chin, snapping his head back and throwing him a good three meters, straight out of the

ring. Smoothing out the material of his gi, Andre bowed to the judge and was awarded the match.

Smiling once more, he mused that modern technology had allowed him to become something of a Renaissance man of the Twenty-Third Century---physically, professionally, mentally, spiritually complete. Complete enough to make these decision easy.

*Kill her.*

## Chapter Two

"I'm only going to ask this once, Captain McIntire," I said in my best "tough-cop" voice, "and if I don't like the answer, I'm handing you over to the resident Patrol officer in the orbital complex. What connection do you have to the Predecessor Cult, and why would they be trying to kill you?"

Kara McIntire seemed to think the question over, slowly sipping her coffee. I'd made it as easy as I could for her: we were in a soundproof, bugproof room in a corner of the Constabulary Headquarters building, just me, her and Jason Chen. I'd even let her take a shower and change into a spare set of police utility fatigues---hell, I'd wanted to get cleaned up myself, anyway. But it was time to get down to business.

"How do I know I can trust you?" McIntire finally asked.

"Feel free not to. But keep in mind that I'm required to defer to Commonwealth authority on any joint investigation, and since I've been coordinating with the Patrol for the last four months on our probe into the cult, I should have handed you up already. The fact that I'm risking a charge of obstruction of a federal investigation should give you some clue as to whose side I'm on. And if that doesn't do it for you, look at it this way: what other choice do you have?"

"I suppose you're right." Downing the last of her coffee, she set the cup on top of my desk. "It all started back about nine months ago. My partner and I were out on Hermes, taking some downtime. I got a priority message from the Corporate Council Headquarters back at L-5



ordering me to proceed to an unsurveyed system on the inner frontier. Apparently, some amateur astronomer had picked up a sublight radio signal, must have originated centuries ago. It was gone by the time we arrived---I don't know why. Maybe electromagnetic interference.

"We landed, went to the projected source of the signal, a cave deep in the mountains. The minute I walked in, I knew we'd hit paydirt. It wasn't natural; someone had carved it out with an energy beam. My partner stumbled upon an antigravity transport tube, still working after all that time." She shook her head. "It took him down to some kind of...storage facility. It was full of equipment---I think it was some kind of machinery, and it looked like it was still functional."

"Predecessor technology?" I interjected. "That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

"The technical crew the Council sent out thought so," McIntire said. "They rushed the two of us out of there like we were poor in-laws, told us not to say a word about the find to anyone. I was pissed at first. I'd imagined the two of us becoming famous, going down in the history books. But they wanted to keep the whole thing hushed up. We went back to Hermes to finish our leave. That's when it started. I guess they were more serious about hushing it up than we thought."

Jase leaned forward in his chair. "Captain McIntire, you're telling us that someone in the Corporate Council wants to kill you because of what you found on that planet."

"I can't think of any other reason," she confirmed.

I stood, pacing restlessly across the room. "But where do the cultists come in? Assuming we believe you, what do the cultists have to do with the Council?"

"I can't help you there," she said. "I've never had any problems with the Cult before."

I looked at her hard, trying to judge the truth. My augment sensors couldn't detect any undue rise in her pulse rate, respiration or body temperature---but if she was augmented herself, that might mean nothing. I wanted to believe her; it surprised me just how much I wanted to.

"If you'd excuse me for a moment," I said to her, turning to Jase. "Could I talk to you outside for a second?"

He followed me out of the corner office, closing the door behind us. I beckoned him farther down the hall, wary of any possible hearing amplification the Captain might be equipped with, finally ducking into a bathroom. We stared a young deputy out of the room, then checked the rest of it out before we were ready to talk.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

"In other circumstances," I sighed heavily, "I'd call a psych counselor. But a platoon of cultists with military weapons..."

"There's no saying if they were after her," Jase pointed out. "They could just as easily have been after you."

"Yeah, I've thought about that," I admitted. "The thing is, I *want* to believe her, and I'm not sure if it isn't just because of the way I feel about the Corporates." I leaned forward over the sink, staring at my reflection for a second. I still had those dark circles under my eyes

that I got after coming down from the biochemical high of combat mode. I needed some sleep. "We know where the cultists do their business. We could hit them, try to dig up some more dirt on this."

"If she is telling the truth," Jase said softly, "then there's something really big going down. Maybe too big for just us."

"You want to kick this upstairs?" I stared him in the eye.

His gaze flickered away from mine, staring at the floor. "Hell, Cal, you know damn well I'll follow your lead. Let's just try to play it safe, okay?"

I looked down at my hands, clenched them into fists. I'd been constable for a long time, and seen a lot happen to my home. I'd been forced to kill a few times, a few more than I'd liked. But not like this. Not since the war had I cut a man open with those Goddamned *claws* they'd put in me like I was some kind of fucking trained animal. It used to make me feel mean to use them---used to make me feel like a god. Now, it just scared the living hell out of me.

"Yeah," I muttered. "We'll play it safe."

\* \* \*

"Caleb, my son." Chief Justice of the Church Court Raina MacLeod nodded her noble, grey head solemnly, as if she were meeting me in Sabbath services instead of staring at a grainy, holographic representation.

She'd been old as long as I could remember, but she was as tough and resilient as anyone I'd ever met---she was the only member of the Court to survive the Tahni Occupation, despite spending over six months in an interrogation cell.

"Sister Raina," I said, returning the nod courteously. "I have need of the Court's permission for a constabulary action against the Predecessor Cult compound."

"As I recall, Caleb, we have had this conversation before," her expression darkened. "You know the feelings of the Church Council about undue harassment of the Predecessor Cultists."

"Only too well, Sister." I couldn't keep the grimace off of my face. I'd had to pull every trick in the book just to get them to allow me to cooperate with the Patrol's investigation into the cultist's activities, and God forbid if we ever had to make any *arrests*.

"I know their proselytizing in town is considered blasphemous by some of us and annoying to nearly everyone," she acknowledged, "but as long as they keep their lodging and their business outside the cities, the Council has shown a willingness to live and let live. And their yearly contribution to the Council's general fund is greatly appreciated, as I'm sure you're aware." She sighed, settling back into her seat. "What is the purpose of the proposed action, Caleb?"

"We have proof," I told her, struggling not to show the sense of urgency I felt, "that the Cult is responsible for the attack in Skintown today. We also have reason to believe that they are stockpiling weapons for other illegal actions. I need to get in there and investigate."

"Well," she began, running a hand through her short-cut, severe bangs, "I may be setting myself up for some strident criticism from Chairman Vingh, but I've always relied on your judgement, Caleb. Do as you think is best."

And that was that. No petitions, no hearings, no writs. Before I'd joined the military and experienced a little more of the Commonwealth, I'd never realized just how dictatorial a system Canaan had: the Council was elected, but our only Constitution was the Church Charter, a document which gave total power to the Council and the Church Court. Good thing for us our religion valued individual responsibility.

I was about to head out of my office when I thought about Rachel and hesitated on the other side of my desk. I tapped my finger on the com console, wondering if it was better to call home and worry her or not call and risk wasting what could be one last chance to tell her I love her. Ah, hell, I've always been a hopeless romantic anyway. I punched in our house number. The hold tone beeped annoyingly for a few moments before a hologram sprang to life above the commo panel. It was just a head-view---our department was too cheap for a full-body projector---but it was enough to give me that old breathless feeling, just like I was a teenager again.

When I was fourteen, Rachel Lowenstein had been the most beautiful girl in the world, and through all I'd been through in the nearly three decades since, nothing had changed. You could see the hint of laughter in her sparkling blue eyes, the smile threatening to break out at any second. If I closed my eyes, I could almost see her long, auburn hair in a pony tail again.

"Hi, honey," I said softly.

"You okay, Cal?" she asked, concern in her face. "You look tired."

"I'm fine," I shook my head. "I just wanted to let you know that the

operation I'm working on is going to run a little longer than I thought. I probably won't be home for a few hours."

"Okay," she smiled. "Give me a call before you leave...I'll be out checking the autoharvesters for a while."

"I'll call," I assured her. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Cal," she gave me that look that always managed to melt me. "Promise you'll come home to me, okay?"

"I promise," I nodded.

Then I cut the transmission and her image flickered away. I stared at the space where it had been for a long moment before I turned and headed back to the ready room, where the STAT team was arming for the assault. Jase and Pete were nearly finished tooling up, and it almost hurt to look at them with the ceiling lights flashing off their reflec armor's millions of microscopic mirrors. For normal ops, we would be using standard duraweave, but the cultists had military laser weapons, and the reflec was our best defense against them. It wasn't the stealthiest stuff in the world---it made you look like a damn Christmas tree, in fact---but this was a straight-up raid, not a snoop-n-poop operation.

I stepped past them to my locker and pulled on my own armor---a duraweave vest under a full reflec suit---buckling my Gauss pistol around it, then grabbed a disruptor rifle off the weapons rack. We were looking for information, so we'd try to take as many as we could alive. Sonic accelerators would be safer, but the hitters they'd sent into Cutter's chop-shop had been wearing sonically-shielded helmets and non-conductive armor, so it would have to be masers. The

Church Council wouldn't cry any tears for the cultists anyway; they considered any Offworlders intruders at best, and the cultists were heretics to boot.

"Did you notify Inspector Kurisawa about the raid?" Pete asked me.

I shook my head. "Fraid it slipped my mind."

"He'll raise holy hell about that," my brother whistled softly, holstering his Gauss machine pistol.

"Extreme circumstances. He can take me to court."

"Constable Mitchell." I turned at the voice behind me to see Kara McIntire standing in the doorway.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I'd like to go with you if I could," she said, stepping into the room, purposefully ignoring the other STAT team members milling around in various states of undress.

"Not a chance," I declared flatly. "You're the target here, remember? You want to give them another shot at you?"

"Look, Constable, I've tried hiding in so-called 'safe' places," she said with a voice hard enough to make everyone in the room turn and stare at her. "All it's done is nearly get me killed. I want to take the fight to them." Her tone softened, became almost pleading. "You saw me back at the chopshop. You know I can handle it."

I scratched my head thoughtfully, shooting a quick look at Jason.

*You mind looking after her?* I asked him over my neurolink. I saw his eyes narrow, a slight hint of a frown.

*All right.* I could almost hear his shrug as he subvocalized into the

communicator implanted on his mastoid bone. *If you'll vouch for her.*

"Draw some armor," I told her. "And a helmet---I want you anonymous out there. You'll stick with Deputy Constable Chen, and you will do exactly as he says. If you disobey any direction he gives you, I'm authorizing him to have you stunned and restrained. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." She nodded, started to turn toward the armor lockers, hesitated, turned back. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," I warned her. "If I find out you're lying to me, I'll personally hand your ass to the Patrol and forget I ever saw you."

\* \* \*

The Cult compound squatted in feudal ugliness at the flattened apex of a foothill of the Mount Zion Range. Reminiscent of some ancient Celtic hill-fort, hand-built stone walls ran along the contour of the slope, surrounding the odd assortment of prefab, buildfoam hemispheres and hand-assembled timber A-frames. It was a mystifying mixture of high-tech augmentation labs and Iron-Age goat pens, hazed over with the smoke of open cessfires and strong with the smell of human and animal offal.

The Universal Church of the Ancients made a practice of keeping itself separate from the "degenerate" humans in the cities. Only their priests could come into town to proselytize, with a couple of senior acolytes for protection. The rest of the faithful remained in a fortified compound as far away from everyone else as possible. I think they would have stayed in an orbital station if it wasn't so expensive to



build one in the outer colonies.

I'd been against letting them build the compound in the first place, but they'd paid a hefty impact fee, and the Church Council had been desperate for funds at the time. So, in return for a couple hundred thousand in corporate scrip, we let them construct what was basically a military fortress less than a hundred clicks from Harristown. Brilliant.

So there was something in the way of perverse gratification running neck and neck with adrenaline through my veins as I scrambled out of the hopper into the middle of the compound, with a STAT squad at my heels. This was battle as I remembered it, laserpulses impacting all around us, flaring off our reflexes in halos of red; the only aberration was the PA speakers from the hoppers blaring a demand that they surrender to the appointed constabulary of the planet Canaan.

Unfortunately for them, they didn't pay too much attention to the surrender requests. Seemingly unprepared for our assault, the cultists were rushing headlong around the compound, some firing weapons wildly, while my men moved in a carefully planned encirclement maneuver. Our masers cut down the unorganized opposition, the microwave blasts set to disable them temporarily through the selective destruction of oxygen-bearing hemoglobin in their blood.

I brought up the middle of the First Squad wedge, coordinating the assault with Jason and Pete over my neurolink with a part of my brain and headcomp while I lent the other portion to watching out for my squad. It was like a dream, in a way---like I was experiencing the

whole thing through the eyes of three or four different people. I could see the view from Pete's helmet sights, see him spin sharply around, the beam emitter of his weapon coming up to send a young, female cultist into panicked convulsions. I could hear Jase ordering his squadleader into a barracks, hear the crack-snap of laserfire in his ears. And yet I fully felt and experienced everything around me, from the way the compressed, reddish soil crunched under my boots to the strong, heady smell of ozone in the air from the beam ionization.

The shouts and screams from the cultists rang in my ears, their white robes flashing across my vision, their faces blurring into one perfect, restructured mask: universally young, flawlessly beautiful, and about as autonomous as a cleaning robot. They parted before us like cattle, most of them overawed by our numbers and the very sight of us: flickering firelight glittered off of our reflec in polychromatic coronas, a terrifyingly beautiful effect that cast us as otherworldly rainbow warriors, untouchable by mere mortals.

We paused only to clear the small storage buildings that seemed to be scattered throughout the compound with little rhyme or reason. A stun grenade in each, followed by a hosing of maserfire before one of the squad stuck a head in to declare it empty. Then we were at our assigned target: the temple itself, where, as far as we knew, the local High Priest of the Predecessor Cult made his dwelling. It was a bigger and more ostentatious building than the other buildfoam structures, made instead of solid duralloy in the general shape of an ancient Terran ziggurat, a stepped pyramid. It was about four stories tall and

forty meters at the base, with no exterior windows and only one entrance, a tall archway set with heavy double doors polished mirror-bright. Had they been closed, we would have been in for a long fight to get them open, but panicked cultists were blocking them from closing, trying desperately to get in and find shelter against our raid.

A long maserburst from my squadmembers laid out three of the cultists in the doorway, and we rushed forward, throwing in a pair of sonic stun grenades before we entered. The hallways were narrow and dimly-lit, decorated by holos of dual star systems and strange, hazy lights moving among the stars. It made it hard to see down the corridor, even using infrared, so I switched to thermal and caught sight of a human heat signature near the end of the hall. I was about to blast it, but my point man beat me to it, and a young male acolyte dropped his pulse pistol, crashing down into the middle of the hall, gasping for breath.

Our dragman---last in the formation---checked him out as we moved up to cover anything coming from around the corner. This was, if anything, proving to me that McIntire was telling the truth---if they'd been after *me* with the attack on Cutter's, they would surely have been much better prepared for our raid.

Around the bend was the main worship center, a barrel-vaulted room with a holo of the Martian "face" and pyramids at the center, surrounded by pads for kneeling. On the ceiling was another representation of the Alpha Centauri system, and the walls were decorated by holos of the spiral arm taken by the Scout expeditions of the late 2,160's. The squad fanned out, securing the room's perimeter,

found two exit doors.

Sending half the troopers through one of the portals, I led the remainder myself down the other, into a dark, narrow passage. We were forced into a file formation, with me pulling the second position. I didn't much care for the situation---if the High Priest was indeed down this way, he'd have undoubtedly taken what was left of his acolyte guards with him, and they'd probably be waiting for us somewhere along the way.

In the end, it was the fact that I wasn't wearing a helmet that saved me. I didn't see any thermal signature, I didn't hear any heartbeat...but near the middle of that corridor, I *smelled* something, something I couldn't quite pick out. My implant chemscanners identified it a moment later as stray molecules of herbal incense mixed with human sweat, concentrated from my right and somewhere above me.

I looked up, giving me just enough warning to raise my maser as a heavy-muscled acolyte, clad in heat- and heartbeat-masking Stealth armor, dropped out of an open panel in the ceiling above me. Things slipped into slow motion as my implants took over, but the angle was wrong for a shot from the maser, and I was forced to use it to block the downslash from his blade. It was a broad, recurved knife with a blade only a few molecules thick at the edge, and it sliced through the outer casing of the maser like it wasn't there, but it caught fast in the iridium emitter shielding. I used his momentum to carry me backward, wrenched the knife out of his hand and planted a heel in his gut as my shoulders slammed against the wall.

My kick rocked him back, but didn't do any serious damage; I was off balance and he felt like he had some serious muscle augmentation. He must have been carrying some hardwired reflexes, too, because he got off the next move before I could regain my balance. Mechanically retractable wrist sabres unfolded with a metallic "snick" from housings on the arms of his Stealth armor, and he lunged at me, whipping the right-hand blade at my head.

I extended my implant talons with a thought and blocked his blow with my left-side blades, the serrated sabres clashing off my razor-honed talons with an almost musical tone. I could feel the strength in his oversized arm as our weapons tangled, both of us trying to pull free, and I brought up my right talons just in time to take the blow from his other set of blades.

The muscles in my shoulders bunched up as our arms met at eye-level, like a pair of Greco-Roman wrestlers. Damn it, I cursed softly in the back of my mind. This sort of shit used to be a hell of a lot easier before everybody and his damned brother decided they needed street surgery. Still, I'd faced enemies a lot tougher than this amateur back in the war, and I was still breathing. Time to show this shithead why.

I gambled he didn't have bone laminants and lashed out at his left knee with my right boot. There was an audible crunch, and the acolyte screamed as his kneecap disintegrated, my heel actually driving his leg digitigrade. He collapsed backward against the opposite wall of the hallway and I jumped out of the way as the trooper behind me zapped him with a disruptor shot.

We left him where he lay, sure that even if he recovered from the

effects of the maser, he wouldn't be going anywhere in his condition. Once upon a time, it would have made me sick to do that to another human being...but after nearly a decade as a cop, I wasn't quite so forgiving with my definition of humanity.

We travelled the rest of the distance down the hallway unopposed, emerging from the hall into what seemed to be the private chambers of the High Priest. Pretty fancy for a priest, but then we Canaanites have simple tastes. The antechamber was decorated with artifacts from a dozen worlds, lavishly displayed in holographic starfields on cases smelted of pure iridium.

A carved-wood archway led from the antechamber to the bedroom, an opulent collection of the finest furs and silks on Canaan gathered around a circular bed and a huge, real-wood desk. Seated behind the desk was a tall, well-built human male dressed in a loose-fitting, sleeveless white robe that revealed some truly big arms. His face was perfect, shaped that way by some genetic surgeon; and his long, blond hair was swept back in a well-shaped mane from a high forehead that could have held a minor brain expansion, but the most remarkable thing about this man was his eyes. They were beyond blue; they were iridescent cyan with a glint of gold in them that flashed in the room's dim light. I doubted the color was natural, though the eyes would have to be---the cult didn't believe in replacing healthy flesh with bionics, though they made heavy use of augmentative implants.

"Come in, my children." The man was unnaturally calm, as if we'd been invited to join him for a late dinner. His voice was...soothing somehow, almost hypnotic, and I suspected he'd had a subsonic

harmonizer installed in his vocal chords. "I am the man you seek."

"We know who you are, Fourcade," I told him, shaking loose of the stupor his voice induced.

"That name is no longer who I am, my child," the High Priest said. "I have given my mundane life over to the Ancients."

I drew my Gauss pistol, shoving it under his nose. "Well, to paraphrase my old drill instructor, you can give your life to the Ancients, but your ass belongs to me..."

\* \* \*

"So this is our mastermind?" Pete nodded at the High Priest as we brought the man into the outer compound. Fourcade looked a bit less regal in a neural restraint web, but he still seemed to think he was in control, and that bugged me.

"Everything's nailed down out here, Cal," Jason told me, walking up with McIntire at his heels. Her helmet was on, but I knew it was her from her heartbeat and heat signature---and, from the heat pouring off the cooling vanes of her disruptor, she'd done more than observe. "The medics are looking after the Gomers we stunned. We didn't take any serious casualties."

I nodded, relieved. "Get some medical crews into the temple. There's a couple bad guys in there and one's pretty busted up."

"You can destroy our bodies, but not our resolve," Fourcade intoned solemnly. "It is our duty to prepare the race for the return of the Ancients."

"Shut up," My brother grunted, nudging him in the shoulder with the muzzle of his disruptor.

"Hey, Pete," I told him, scowling at the High Priest, "you wrap things up here. Jase and I'll take Mr. Wonderful back to the station and see if he's still so talkative."

He waved at me with his helmet. "Have fun."

I stepped toward one of the hoppers with Fourcade behind me, guarded by Jason and McIntire. My foot was on the ramp when I heard the whine of the jets, and craned my neck around to see the shuttle coming down in a tight spiral. I knew the shape of it from past experience and didn't even have to see the Patrol Service markings on it to already begin to feel exasperated.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

"Kurisawa?" Jase asked, wincing.

"Who the fuck else?" I nodded at Fourcade. "Get him inside the hopper, get the hell out of here while I try to stall." I turned to Captain McIntire. "You come with me."

We walked back down the ramp, while Jason took the High Priest up into the hopper and closed the hatch behind them. This would be close. The shuttle grew into the big, stub-winged monster I knew it to be, kicking up a billowing cloud of dust as its landing jets sucked in air, fed it through radiation-shielded ducts in the fusion reactor and blew it out as a stream of superhot gas.

The heat slammed down on the compound like an oppressive hand, the roar from the jets growing into a deafening whine that pounded at our eardrums. But most of my attention was focused on Jason's hopper, which was starting to slowly raise from the dirt on the cushion of air from the multiple ducted fans in its broad, flat belly. I



tried to use my fervent hopes to help it rise even faster, but it did quite well on its own, nearly two hundred meters up by the time the Patrol shuttle's belly ramp extended. A dozen Patrol officers marched down it in full head-to-toe vacuum suits, their armor plating gleaming in the light from the shuttle's landing beacons, their heavy pulse rifles held at high port.

They formed two ranks, splitting down the middle to allow Senior Inspector Shoto Kurisawa to walk down between them. He was a tall man, about a meter-nine with a slender build that showed a lot of time spent in zero-g. His sky-blue uniform was spotless and exquisitely-tailored and his short-cut black hair was fashionably styled. You could tell immediately that he just *hated* coming dirtside, where he weighed too much and the air was too thick, and the weather was usually miserable. What I hated was the way his nose wrinkled whenever he set foot on my home.

The expression on his sculpted face was beyond distaste, however, as he stomped down the ramp and strode briskly up to me. His eyes were narrowed in rage, and the veins in his neck were bulging out so violently that I expected his head to explode any second. What I found even more disturbing than his obvious anger, however, was his company on that ramp: a short, broad-shouldered woman with hard, gunmetal grey eyes and severely-bobbed brown hair, dressed in a dark, baggy business suit. She was Trina Wellesley, local Chief Investigator for the Corporate Security Force, and a perennial pain in my ass. Why she was there I had no idea---Kurisawa was a Commonwealth cop with a warrant to investigate the Cult, but

Wellesley worked for the Corporate Council and her authority extended only to the mines and the housing projects.

"Mitchell!" Kurisawa bellowed in my face. "Just what the hell do you think you're doing here?"

I shrugged. "It was a nice night for a walk."

"Don't patronize me, you back-country hick! I'll have you brought up on fucking *federal* charges! Do you have any idea how long we've been investigating these shitheads? And you've blown it all with this Goddamned stupid stunt!"

"Maybe you should have been doing a little less investigating and a little more acting, Inspector," I shot back at him, deciding to take the offensive. "About four hours ago, these motherfuckers came after me in a chop shop in Skintown, twenty of them with military lasers, and butchered twenty-five people! So don't talk to me about your Goddamned investigation!"

"Yes, Constable," Wellesley cut in, her tone cold and businesslike, in contrast to mine and the Inspector's. "We've heard about your little adventure in the Corporate housing area---second hand, I might add. I'd like to know how you justify shooting up Corporate property without notifying the Security Force."

Kurisawa shook his head. "You're in deep shit, Mitchell. And don't think that your Church Council can pull your ass out of this one. You will turn over all your prisoners to my men immediately, along with all the files you've accumulated in our joint investigation, and then I'll sit down and decide if I want to bother to press charges."

"It's amazing." I grinned, trying to keep the anger rising up in the

pit of my stomach under control.

"What's amazing?" Wellesley wanted to know.

I looked her in the eye, gesturing at Kurisawa. "The whole time he was talking, your lips didn't even move."

"That's it!" Kurisawa screamed, fists clenching. He drew his pulse pistol, waving it in my face. "You're under arrest, you fucking smartass! Give me your gun now!"

I didn't even need to look behind me to know that my troops were beginning to circle around us, weapons at the ready. We outnumbered the Patrolmen, but the masers were useless against their reflective suits.

*Kill him*, The Machine screamed at me from somewhere in the distance, still electrified with the adrenaline of the battle. *Kill them all...* Shut up.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, Kurisawa," I said contemptuously, slapping the pistol out of his hand so fast his eyes went wide. "You can have your prisoners, but they'd better not show their faces in any of *my* cities again, or I'll burn them down where they stand."

I turned away from him, betting he didn't have the testicles to shoot me in the back, and walked over to Pete, who had his Gauss machine pistol held at hip level. "Pete, get the men on the hoppers. Leave the cultists for the hard-shells. We're out of here."

Kurisawa gave me a look of pure venom as I passed by him on the way to my hopper. "This isn't over, Mitchell. You won't be able to hide behind your men forever."

"You'll regret this action, Constable," Wellesley said in a calmer voice. "You know you can't fight the federal government for long."

"Pardon me, Investigator Wellesley." I paused, looking her in the eye. "I wasn't aware that *you* represented the federal government."

"I'm warning you, Mitchell," she said in a very dangerous tone. "If you're hiding her from us, you'll go down with her."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I told her stonefaced, feeling a cold lump settled in my stomach. Despite all Kurisawa's bluster, I knew that Wellesley was the more powerful of the two.

I walked into the hopper, sat down, and let out a deep breath. Kara McIntire took a seat next to me, shrugging off her helmet.

"That was damned dangerous," she told me matter-of-factly. I turned and looked her in the eye.

"You," I said, "are going to my house. They're going to be watching the station---and frankly, I don't trust anyone else. You're going to stay there, under guard, until I think it's safe to move you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see what our friend the High-Priest has to say," I settled back in the padded chair. "After that..." I shook my head.

"God knows. At least we'll have a better idea what we're up against."

## Interlude: Skintown

Cutter's chopshop stood silent as a grave, its front entrance yawning open, the doors blown inward. Constabulary traffic barriers still stood watch without, their warning lights blinking at the abandoned street, but the blackened pockmarks scarring the outer wall and the blood stains within were the only evidence of the carnage that had played itself out only hours before.

Sophisticated surgical equipment lay scattered in Cutter's many operatories, yet none of the local lowlifes so much as cast a sideways glance at the building. There was one unshakable law in Skintown, enforced even in death: don't fuck with Cutter. Those who'd ignored this unwritten ordinance had fallen upon unfortunate circumstances, and not even the most desperate Kick addict would test those waters.

Despite that danger, across from the chopshop, concealed in the shadows of a blind alley, a lone figure watched. Crimson oculars scanned the building front, and a mouth filled with sharpened metal teeth curled in a smile. With a whine of servos and a creak of leather, the Skinganger moved across the street, slipping through the gaping doorway with a careful glance over his shoulder. The impact of his armored boots was a hollow sound echoing off the walls with the regularity of a heartbeat. If the ghostly noise bothered the intruder, he gave no indication of it, treading purposefully down the corridor to Cutter's operator. Surgical equipment was scattered in charred bits across the floor, but he ignored it, moving directly to a seemingly empty corner of the room.

From a pocket of his jacket, the Skinner's one natural hand retrieved a small magnetic key. Activating its impulse, he waved it over the section of floor and immediately a square a meter on each side opened with an audible click, popping up with a hermetic hiss. The intruder used his bare-metal bionic arm to lift the weighty hatch, letting it crash backward against the wall behind it as he peered at the darkness within the hole with his cybernetic eyes.

The hatch had covered a tunnel, which stretched down farther than he could see, a ladder mounted invitingly on one face of the passage. The Skinner shook his head doubtfully, suddenly wondering if the risk was worth the corporate scrip he'd been promised. But greed overcame fear and he lowered himself into the hatchway, barely squeezing his broad, half-cybernetic body into the hole.

Claustrophobia gnawed at him, along with the conviction that something nasty waited for him below---something with lots of teeth and a taste for metal. Unable to see beneath him, he found solace in speed, descending the ladder as quickly as he could. Ten meters later, he emerged into a darkened chamber, cold and featureless even to the thermal lenses of his oculars...but for one, solitary glowing star that indicated an active power hookup. Moving carefully, one shuffling step at a time, the Skinner reached out with his natural hand and felt the contours of a switch. Flipping it upward, he was rewarded with a flood of harsh white illumination from the ceiling...and with a clear view of the chamber.

The Skinner's mouth dropped open, his hands falling to his sides. Stretched out before him was a laboratory at least three times as big

as the operating room above, packed solid with the most sophisticated equipment he'd ever seen. One whole wall, from floor to ceiling, was nothing but row upon row of interlinked holographic computer processing units---the latest, state-of-the-art technology that was as close to duplicating a sentient brain pattern as human science had ever come.

But most of the space was taken up by a huge, transplas vat, hooked into the support equipment by dozens of feed cables. Pink biotic fluid roiled with millions upon millions of laboring nanites---self-replicating microscopic machines---all surrounding a dark, distorted mass, vaguely human shaped...and yet, somehow, not.

He found it difficult to tear his gaze away from the thing...it seemed to draw him in. But the data spike he'd been entrusted with seemed to dig into his side through the thick leather of his jacket, reminding him of the job he'd come here to do. Fishing the obtrusive bit of crystal from his pocket, he found an input jack in the midst of the rows of computer terminals and inserted it, then stepped back quickly, wary of just what might happen next.

Seemingly, nothing did. The Skinner relaxed, just slightly disappointed. When he'd seen the lab, he'd imagined something apocalyptic; but, as the minutes passed, he began to wonder if this all hadn't been Cutter's idea of a practical joke. When he'd been hired by the street surgeon, nearly a year ago, the job had sounded pretty screwy: if Cutter were to die, he was to use a certain code number to retrieve a data spike from a rented office across town and bring it to this place, then wait for further instructions. Instructions from whom?

So caught up was he in his thoughts that the Skinner nearly missed the pumping noises behind him, but he did notice when the biotic fluid in the tank began to rapidly drain. The amorphous figure within it settled slowly against the bottom of the vat, revealing more and more of its form as the fluid retreated. The Skinganger stepped back from the tank, nearly petrified with fear as he caught sight of the thing. All the bionic hardware that had given him such a sense of security suddenly seemed terribly inadequate as a shield against the thing that was rising to its feet in the now-drained vat, its *tail* twitching horribly.

With a metallic bang, the tank separated longitudinally and fell in two pieces to the floor, effectively blocking the Skinner's way to the ladder that was the chamber's only exit. Flight no longer being an option, fight instincts took over. Gulping down the lump in his throat, the man clawed under his jacket for the compact slug pistol in his belt, knowing instinctively as he did it that the small weapon would be no use against the apparition he faced.

"No need for that, young friend," the thing said in a voice terrifyingly familiar, a voice that froze the Skinner in his tracks. "You've done your job well." It stepped off of the remains of the tank, shaking itself like a dog, spraying the walls with excess biotic fluid. "Now, tell me, who was responsible?"

The Skinner didn't have to ask what he meant; everything was becoming preternaturally clear to him...and, gradually, less and less frightening.

"The Cult," he rasped, trying to work up enough saliva to talk. "It



was the Cult."

"Fascinating. Then it appears we have much work to do."

The Skinner nodded eagerly, and two smiles greeted each other in sparkles of sharpened metal teeth.

## Chapter Three

"You'll be staying with my wife," I explained to McIntire as we flew away from New Jerusalem, away from the mines and the city. "House is out in the open, with about five hundred meters cleared on each side, and I'll leave Pete there." I nodded at my brother, who was flying the hopper. "Plus a couple other deputies rotating through."

"Is that safe for your family?" she asked, turning in her seat to look at me.

"Should be, for a while---at least until I can check out your story."

"Check it with who?"

"Some friends from the war," I told her. "People I can trust."

"I used to think I knew who to trust," she mused, a touch of bitterness in her voice.

Beneath us, the ugliness of New Jerusalem and Harristown quickly gave way to the tall pines of Dakota Forest, genetically engineered growths designed to thrive in Canaan's harsh environment. A "gift" from the Commonwealth Colonial Authority after the First War with the Tahni, they were beautiful and majestic, but deadly---all the transplanted flora and fauna was squeezing out the local ecology, transforming the planet from Canaan to a cheap, souvenir-shop copy of Earth. Already, more than a thousand local species of animals were extinct outside the zoological preserves.

The forest, vast as it was, passed beneath the hopper in only a few minutes as Pete fed the ducted fans more power from the hydrogen turbines. Beyond the pines was the Old Growth, a jungle of squat,

compact local trees, evolved to conserve heat during Canaan's Long Night and radiate it during the Day via an incredible blossom of broad, brightly-colored leaves. It was such a beautiful display that the first settlers had built a festival around it. With the Reflectors in place, though, things had changed. The garish half-day produced grotesque, pitifully-stunted buds which quickly died, and many of the trees didn't bloom at all when the day came. I couldn't help but think that the Corporate presence had produced an analogous effect on our society, stunting its natural growth with their damned interference.

The New Society Church as a social institution was dying. The family farms which had been its demographic base had been pushed out of business by the Corporate Council's orbital food factories---which would probably be obsolete themselves if nanotech replicators can ever be made cheap enough for general release. The new generation was moving to the cities to find work in the mines, adding to the overpopulation and crime, and every day more of the old-timers were giving up and moving offplanet.

God, what a depressing bastard I'd become. Maybe it was time to consider moving on. Find some frontier colony off the main Transition Lines and start over... But, no. I knew Rachel would never go for that; Canaan was her home, plain and simple. Her parents---and mine---had lost their lives defending it, along with thousands of others during the war. She'd die before she gave it up.

Shaking free of my reverie, I noticed that the Old Growth had fallen away and we were cruising over the farmland. These were the old farms, not the new, hydroponic food factories the Corporates had

set up. Back before the First Interstellar War in the 2,060's, just after the wormhole jumplinks had been discovered, the original Canaanites had set up the colony as a haven for the fledgling New Society of Friends Church. With a belief fostered in the Sino-Russian War and the near-devastation which followed the nuclear exchange between the two nations, the Friends were pacifists and technological simplists who wished to set up a simple farming community without over-reliance on machinery. Initially, it had been no big problem---there were more habitable planets than there were colonists, and the stress was on getting the excess population off Earth. We'd sat out the first war, too far away from the Tahni Frontier to be affected. Even the postwar Pirate Cabals hadn't bothered us---no high-tech loot, too few people.

But then the development of the Transition drive had provided a way to reach T-Space without having to hunt down one of the rare jumpgates, and systems which used to have no strategic value had found themselves at Transitional "junction points," where the gravito-inertial lines of force from several key systems intersected. One of these systems had been Goshen, which led to Canaan's occupation by the Tahni late in the war as a staging area for a planned, last-ditch attack on Earth.

I'd been deep into some sabotage mission when it happened, and hadn't even found out till months later, when Jason Chen---then a Senior Lieutenant in StarFleet Intelligence---managed to find me and let me know what was going on. Our Fleet strategists, it seemed, were willing to let the Tahni have Canaan in exchange for time to prepare

for their attack. But that wasn't good enough for Jason, or for me.

I had stolen a stealthship, loaded it up with weapons and ditched it on the Nightside of Canaan, in order to help organize a resistance with the people that had been my neighbors---the same people that had rejected me when I'd decided to attend the Commonwealth Service Academy and because I was friends with Jason, an Offworlder. Together, we'd taken control of the Orbital Defense Satellite System the StarFleet had put up---against local protests---early in the war, and coordinated a strike from the satellites with an attack from the Fleet, which Jason had arranged with the help of Colonel Murdock, my CO. The Tahni fleet had been destroyed, and the war basically ended except for the invasion of the Tahni homeworld...but at a high price.

My parents and baby sister had died in the initial occupation; and my older brother, Isaac---Isaac, who I'd argued with and fought with, and sometimes hated---had been killed during the attack on the control center, taking a shot meant for me. The Karmic kick in the ass was that I could have probably survived that hit.

So now it was me, and Pete and Rachel...Rachel, whom I'd left a bubbly, vacuous teenager and returned to find a wiser, tougher woman. Hardened by the deaths of her husband and infant daughter, she had become a leader of the resistance on Canaan. We'd filled the voids in each others' souls, and in her arms I'd found my humanity again, found the gentler parts of myself.

Things had looked so much more promising back then... After the War, we'd married and taken over my parent's farm; and, in gratitude for what I'd done (and, I'm fairly certain, because I was too dangerous

to be a private citizen), the Church Council voted me Constable for life. It had seemed almost an honorary title at first---Canaan's crime rate was negligible.

Then up popped the Corporates, with a license from the Commonwealth Strategic Resources Commission to hunt for iridium, and my job had become much dirtier. Harristown and New Jerusalem had seen an almost overnight influx of Offworlders; within a year, they'd become preform cesspits with built-in corruption. It seemed that the mining corporations brought their own little racket with them, employees earning a little extra money by smuggling drugs and guns onto the planet, and it was all dumped into my lap.

I'd tried to cut off the smugglers at their source, but Wellesley and the Corporates had hamstrung every move I made, refusing to allow local jurisdiction over their employees. The drugs and addictive ViR programs made their workers happy. There was nothing the Church could do about it; the Corporates had Commonwealth backing. I thought a lot about quitting, but it came down to the fact that if I didn't do it, Jase would have to.

Finally, we reached the house. Nothing fancy---actually kind of primitive. Wood and brick construction, mostly by hand; two stories tall above-ground. Things were always pretty dead around the farm at Night; only the autoharvesters were active, making their silent, methodical way through the crop rows. I don't know why we kept the farm up; nobody bought from us anymore. We usually wound up trading with other farmers. But Rachel insisted. It had been our people's way of life for more than a century, and I suspected it was a

way for her to keep her family's memory alive.

Pete brought the hopper down in a gentle spiral, its belly fans kicking up a whirling cloud of dust as we settled to the bare ground on the north side of the house. A gentle bump rocked the cabin slightly as the hopper touched down, and Pete cut the engines while we hit the quick-releases for our safety harnesses.

"Here we are," I announced to McIntire, popping the side hatch of the hopper.

She was silent as we stepped out of the craft, her face unreadable. She reminded me of a rabbit cornered by a bobcat: twitchy and nervous, eyes darting quickly around to watch for an attack.

McIntire followed me up the path to the back door of the house, a soft shadow falling across the wall from the slowly-setting Reflectors that couched the door in a pocket of darkness. I guess that's why, when the back door suddenly swung open in front of us, McIntire whipped out her sidearm, nearly putting a round through Rachel's head. I caught the Captain's gun hand halfway up, pulling the laser out of her grasp before she could fire.

"Hi, honey," I muttered, rolling my eyes, "I'm home."

"This must be the guest you told me about on the phone." Rachel arched an inquisitive eyebrow. She was still dressed in her work coveralls, and I guessed she'd just gotten back from the fields.

"Uh, yeah...", I stuttered. "Rachel, this is Captain Kara McIntire. She'll be staying here for a couple days."

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Mitchell," Kara shook Rachel's hand, seeming a bit embarrassed. "Sorry..."

"That's quite all right, Captain," Rachel insisted, unflappable as always. "Won't you come in?" she waved a hand at the open door.

We followed Kara into the kitchen, Pete bringing up the rear, and I fell, exhausted, into a chair at the table, feeling the hand-carved wood creaking beneath me. The back-to-back combat highs were really beginning to get to me, and the day wasn't over yet.

"Pete," I said, "why don't you take Captain McIntire to the guest room, show her the bathroom, then get yourself set up. I'll send some deputies to spell you once I get back to the station."

"Sure thing, Cal," he said. "This way, Captain." I waited till he and McIntire had left the room before I turned to Rachel.

"You're going back to the station?" she asked me, disappointment obvious in the set of her jaw.

"I have to." I stood with a groan, walking over to her. I took her in my arms, half comforting her, half supporting myself, and hobbled back toward our bedroom. "As soon as I get into some fresh clothes."

"Cal," she said gently, walking with me, "you know I love you...but you look like hell."

"I knew I could count on you for support, hon," I laughed quietly, kissing her on the temple as we angled through the bedroom door. "The worst part is, I feel just like I look."

She pushed away from me in the middle of the darkened room, piercing me with that blue-eyed stare.

"What's going on, Cal?" she asked me straight-up. I sighed, sitting on the bed, stripping off my coveralls.

"It's big," I told her seriously, throwing the sweat-soaked garment



aside. I gestured back toward the guest room. "That woman was a Corporate mineral scout. A few months ago, she and her partner found a Predecessor site, with what she thinks was active alien technology, including gravity control devices." I saw Rachel's eyes go wide. "They rushed her and her partner away, told them to be quiet about it. No big deal there." I shrugged, moving over to a closet to pull out a fresh set of duty fatigues. "You wouldn't want somebody else stumbling onto something like that if you had the monopoly. But then some street hoods killed her partner, and when she reported it to the Corporate Security Force, they attacked and destroyed her ship."

"Why kill her?" Rachel asked. "If all they're worried about is keeping the technology secret until they can market it, why not just buy her off?"

"Good question." I sat back down next to her, with the clean clothes across my lap. "The real puzzle is where the Predecessor Cult comes in. I was in a chop-shop in Skintown, talking to a contact, when he introduced me to Kara. Before she could tell me too much, a bunch of cultists with military weapons raided the place, and they must have been looking for her."

"But what would the CSF have to do with them?"

"That's the question. And that's why I've got to get back to the station. Jason's got the High-Priest there, and I'd like to get some answers out of him before Kurisawa and the Patrol figures out we have him."

"Are you in trouble, Cal?" she asked me, her hand resting on the bare skin of my shoulder.

"Maybe." I shrugged. "But it won't be the first time." I turned toward her, leaning over to kiss her on the lips. "I really should get dressed and get going."

"Shouldn't you get a shower first?" She mimed an exaggerated sniff at my left armpit.

I leaned towards her with an exaggerated leer. "Well, I don't know, Mrs. Mitchell. Just what kind of shower do you have in mind?"

She pushed me away, nose wrinkling. "For you, Constable, *any* kind of shower."

I clutched at a phantom wound in my heart. "Ooh, aren't you the romantic one?"

"We'll be romantic when you come back from the station," she promised, putting a hand on the back of my neck and pulling me into a tender kiss. "Now, go get a shower."

"Yes, dear," I acquiesced with pretended meekness, getting to my feet. "While I'm gone, though, I'd really like it if you stayed around the house. If anyone comes around, let Pete handle them. And I want you to get the rifle out of the closet, keep it handy, okay?"

"All right," she agreed. "You be careful, too, okay?"

"Always." I kissed her again on my way to the bathroom. I paused halfway through the door, turning back to her. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I almost missed her soft whisper as the door swung shut.

\* \* \*

"What have you got?" I asked Jase, as he stepped out of the interrogation room, closing the soundproof door behind him.

"You mean aside from two dozen calls from the Church Council, the Commonwealth ambassador and the Corporate Consulate?" he replied tiredly, running a hand through his matted hair. "Not a hell of a lot. This one's a tough nut." He gestured at the wall viewer that showed Fourcade, still dressed in his priestly robes, strapped to a seat in the interrogation room. The High Priest looked little the worse for wear from the two hours of questioning.

"You've already tried the hypnoprobe?" I assumed.

"Twice." Jason shrugged, getting himself a cup of coffee from the dispenser. "He's got some kind of imprinted protection, plus a headcomp---we just don't have the facilities here to make him talk." He chuckled humorlessly. "Maybe back in the StarFleet Intel holding center, but not here. Drugs don't work either---the damned augmentation again. I'd give my left nut for a qualified Netdiver right now."

"Take it easy," I laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Lisa'd kill me if I messed with the family jewels."

"Oh, God, Lisa!" he smacked himself on the forehead. "I forgot to even call her."

"Go ahead. I'm going to visit our honored guest."

"Good luck," he said, heading out of the anteroom to find a comscreen.

Luck I wouldn't need. There were some things about my implants that I didn't tell anyone, not even Jason. I took a swig of coffee, setting my half-empty cup down on the table before I walked into the interrogation room. Fourcade looked up as I entered, breaking off

from some kind of mantra, the calm smile returning to his perfect face.

He shook his head pityingly. "When will you apostates learn that I am the servant of our Fathers? I reveal only what they would have me to."

I ignored his jabbering, walked up behind him and gently moved aside the hair over his right ear until I found the face socket there. I plugged a jack from my belt comlink into it, even as he began to lose his composure and struggle against his restraints. I instructed my headcomp to tune my neurolink to the frequency of my comunit, then ran the penetration program that I hadn't accessed for over a decade.

Part of my consciousness fragmented and spiraled down the link, through a virtual birth-tunnel of neuronically flashes and onto a backlit, cyan plain that stretched the length and breadth of this reality in agoraphobic expanse. Waiting for me there was Fourcade's analog, a gigantic, looming digital angel of light...a virtual Gabriel, welcoming me into his celestial realm with outspread arms and the eyes of a god. I approached him as a black vacancy in cyberspace, a spectral demon invading Fourcade's twisted Heaven.

"You will not overcome me on this level, Unbeliever." His voice was the rush of the wind and the crash of the ocean, each word highlighted by a crack of lightning that I felt rather than heard. "My power here is Legion."

His image split and split again, multiplying into an army of cybernetic cherubim that filled the plain before me, each raising high a flaming sword. I didn't waste words with the simulacrum, nor did I

bother with duplicating my analog...such things were psych warfare, designed for virtual combat between equals. On this field, I was so much the superior that I could have been alone.

The dark ghost that was my analog elongated into a thread of nothingness, spearing through the angelic ranks and directly into the core of his headcomp's defenses. Battles were fought in the cyberspace between us, battles as violent as the taking of Canaan and just as real to the two of us. But these battles were fought in nanoseconds, as bloodless cybernetic soldiers sought to block my way into Fourcade's headcomp and my own virtual warrior slew them. His angelic guardians evaporated in the swath of my shadowy talons; and, in the end, the Dantean gateway to the memory core was before me, lacking only a notice that any who entered should abandon all hope. A gentle nudge pushed it open, and I was in.

Suddenly, everything that was in his headcomp was in mine, a flood of data that took my own processors long seconds to sift through...but it wasn't enough. Oh, there were all sorts of interesting tidbits about the times and places for weapons and drug deals, items for which I would have sold my soul not twenty-four hours ago, but not what I was looking for. I'd have to delve a bit deeper...

This was the tricky part---the part only a handful of people knew was possible. Technically, you can't penetrate a person's mind using their headcomp...but if you can get control of the implant, you can order it to download a section of memory into the hard drive. How far back to go? That depended on how far back this whole thing went. I decided on a year, since that was when Kara had made her

find. Instructing the headcomp to download the section of memory, I then brought the data down the link to my own implant and into my own memory...

A flash of harsh, white light coalesced into the noonday glare of Tau Ceti and I found myself as Kevin Fourcade, an out-of-work loaderjock, a psych-burnout from service in the war, living on the dole on Aphrodite. I/he wandered the streets of Kennedy City, sometimes resorting to petty crime to relieve the mind-numbing boredom and the recurring stress attacks, until finally I/he found the local temple of the Church of the Ancients, and lost myself/himself in the first cause I/he could believe in since the Marines had cast him aside, finding a way to make sense of my/his senseless life.

First a brutal initiation, followed in close succession by the operations, the implants, the indoctrination---losing our face, our identity, our soul. It seemed endless, but I/he finally worked my way up from acolyte to priest, doing things I/he'd never dreamed of before, things I/he would have once considered horrifying. Murder, torture, rape, computer brainwashing... anything was justified in the service of the Ancients.

After months of faithful and rewarding service came the great opportunity, the opening to take the truth of the Predecessors to the unknowing on Canaan as a high priest---it had seemed so fast to me/him, but the Cult was a new religion, and opportunities were many. I/He'd been handed this challenging honor in the morning, and the same afternoon had been shuttled to an orbital station where, before catching a ship outsystem, had been introduced to the Hidden Allies of

the truth, to the Great Friends of the Faithful...

Sonofabitch.

I shook my head to clear it of Fourcade's memories, wishing I could scrub my brain clean. But I had what I wanted...more than I wanted. I took one last look at his face. He seemed less preternaturally calm now and more of a preprogrammed robot. I shook my head in pity, unplugged the `face jack, and stepped out into the anteroom. Jason was already there, looking at me curiously. I guess the strain of the penetration showed on my face.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," he said. "What's wrong?"

"We've got some big trouble," I told him. "I need to talk to you somewhere safe."

"This isn't safe?" He looked around in confusion.

"No," I told him emphatically. "This isn't safe at all."

Before he could voice the questions evident in his face, the paging tone signaled from the room's comlink. I hit the control to accept it, and an image of Roland Gutteriez, our watch deputy for the night, sprang to life above the projector.

"Sir," he said, seeming decidedly uncomfortable, "there's a call online for you from Inspector Kurisawa. He seems, uh, rather upset."

"Shit's going to hit the turbines now," Jason muttered.

"That martinet's the least of our problems now. Go ahead and patch him through, Roland."

Gutteriez's face shimmered away, momentarily replaced by the unpleasant visage of everyone's favorite Patrol officer. Judging by the scowl on his face, I doubted whether I really wanted to hear what

Shoto had to say.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" I asked businesslike, as if the confrontation at the cult compound had never happened.

"Hand him over, Mitchell," Kurisawa snapped perfunctorily. "No games, no backwoods stonewalling, just hand him the hell over. Or I'll send in an assault squad to haul him *and* you up here in restraints."

"No need for that." I shook my head, deciding I had everything Fourcade could give me already. "Where would you like to pick him up?" A look of mild consternation came over Shoto's face, as if he'd expected more resistance out of me.

"Have him at the spaceport in an hour," he ordered. "Berth 3-A. One of my people will take him from there. But don't think you're getting away with interfering with a federal investigation, Mitchell," he added, his tone becoming harsh. "I haven't forgotten what happened, and after I finish cleaning up the mess you've left, I'm filing formal charges against you."

"Whatever turns you on, Shoto. But you'd best remember, your authority over me extends only to this investigation. We're not an enfranchised colony here, and we technically fall under the jurisdiction of the military, not the Patrol. If we didn't have a Corporate presence, you couldn't even set foot on this planet without my permission. I'll cooperate with you as far as I think is required by law, but if you ever try to pull another grandstand stunt like you did back at the compound, I'll call in the StarFleet Sector Commander and have him haul your ass into the Commonwealth Circuit Court." I cut off the transmission before he could reply and turned to Jason. "Have



Fourcade delivered to the Hardhats at the port. I'm going back to my house...I want you to meet me there in no more than two hours."

"Okay, Cal," he agreed. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," I said, heading for the door. "Have the guard on my property doubled, and changed every four hours. And I want them carrying the heavy stuff."

"You think the cultists have more people?" he asked me curiously.

"I wish the cultists were the worst of our worries," I told him. "I'll see you in a couple of hours."

\* \* \*

I took my personal hopper out of the station garage and flew it out of the city as fast as the turbines would take me. My stomach was turning more RPM's than the engine...I felt disoriented, like I wasn't quite sure what was real. I found myself fervently longing for the days when all I had to worry about was trying to get out of daily prayer meetings so I could sneak out to the caves with Rachel.

Hell, even in the military, it had been simpler than this...I went where they told me, killed when they told me. It hadn't been much of a life, but at least it had been simple. Now everything was tangled up, I didn't know what to believe, and there was no easy answer.

I was so lost in thought, I hadn't registered the scenery passing beneath me until my hopper was over the Old Growth. That's when they hit me. My hopper's proximity alarms went off like a slap in the face, and I had about a tenth of a second to look at the radar screen before the air around my cockpit went bright and the craft shuddered violently. G-forces threw me against my restraints as the hopper went

into a spin, and I fought to regain control, trying to ignore the dizzying view outside my cockpit.

I grappled with the wheel like Jacob wrestling the angel in the desert, finally received the blessing of stabilization, and got a very clear view of the stubby trees about twenty meters beneath me before my hopper plowed into them belly-first. There was a sound like God farting as metal and plastic was sheered away from the body of the hopper, and then I was jerked up short against my restraints. Without my bone lamination and the cyborganic webbing that circumscribed my innards, I would have died quite thoroughly right there, every major organ in my body ruptured and my neck and spinal cord shattered like an emigrant's dreams.

As it was, I wasn't going to be doing cartwheels anytime soon, and if my pharmacy organ hadn't been pumping me with endorphines, I'd have been in some serious pain. I shook my head clear, pulled the quick-release on my harness and hauled my abused body out of the pilot's seat. The hopper had crashed at about a forty-five degree angle to my right, and I dropped out of the seat, slammed against the opposite hull. I had to get away from the wreck fast, before they came back around to finish me off.

*Jason, I transmitted as I wrenched the hatch open. Jason, this is Cal. I've been shot down. Do you read me?*

I didn't receive any reply as I fell through the open hatch, rolling on my shoulder to the soft ground two meters below. I paused for a moment, looked back at the hopper, and whistled softly. Whatever they had hit me with had torn off the aft three meters of the flyer, and

both rear directional fans with it. The metal there still glowed hot, steam hissing off it in the moist night air.

I turned my attention to the sky, but saw nothing until I switched to infrared. Then I spotted the glowing disc of another hopper, running without lights, arcing around toward the crash site. If I'd had a heavy Gauss rifle, he'd have been toast, but my sidearm couldn't do much more than scratch his paint. My best shot was getting to the farmhouse.

The Old Growth rose up thick around me, the gaps between the trees filled in by Tangleweed. Normally slow going, but I didn't have time for the conservative approach. Extending my talons, I threw myself into the brush, slashing like a human machete, following my integral compass toward the farm.

As I went, I kept trying to contact Jason or Rachel, but whoever was after me must have laid down a wide-spectrum jam. At least, I figured, I would be safe from air attacks. There was no way they could pick up my body heat through the trees, and even if they did, it would be almost impossible to get a clear shot at me. I'd be okay unless they landed some ground troops.

Barely had that thought passed through my mind when a crackling burst of laserfire exploded against a tree trunk not ten centimeters from my head, sending steam and scaly bark flying like grenade fragments. I cut to my left, not hesitating to get a look at my attacker, just picking up my speed. I ran a serpentine path through the trees, slashing my way through the Tangleweed, ignoring the thorns and sharp spurs of bark that snagged at my jacket and fatigue pants.

Why? I suddenly wondered. Why come after me now? If it was the Patrol, they would simply have arrested me. If it was Wellesley and the CSF, wouldn't they try to capture me alive, try to force me to tell them where Kara was? Unless...they already knew where she was.

God *damn* it! They'd be hitting the farm, too! I pulled up short, ducking behind a tree. They had to have a vehicle, and I had to find it. There was no way I could get there in time on foot. I took a deep breath, slowed my respiration, stayed perfectly still and just listened. I could hear the cracking of brush underfoot not three meters to my rear, and similar noises all around me, though farther away. I shut them out, shut out the hum of the hopper buzzing overhead, and tried again.

There. About...three hundred meters ahead of me and slightly to the right, I could just make out the whine of a turbine. Either a grounded hopper or a high-capacity cargo truck was laying in wait very near the edge of the Old Growth, where it gave way to the farmland.

I switched my focus back to the brush-breaker close behind me, and found him to be a little closer now, coming up on my left. I sheathed my talons---this would have to be a clean kill if I was going to use his clothes to get me to the vehicle. Two more steps...just about another meter and he'd be past my tree. He was being cautious; I could tell by the long periods between footsteps. I'd have to be quick.

Another step and I could see the muzzle of a pulse carbine protruding about three centimeters past the tree...I'd want to time my

jump just as he began his next move forward. I watched the muzzle of that pulse gun like a hawk watching a snake, waiting till it dipped almost imperceptibly with his step forward...then I lashed out with a front snapkick that tore the weapon from his gloved hands, threw myself into him.

I barely had time to register the key tactical data in my headcomp---visored helmet, soft duraweave fatigues, ceramic tactical vest, no sidearm, no melee weapons---before we were both on the ground, my knee coming down in his solar plexus, driving the wind from him in an explosive burst. I wrenched the helmet backwards, exposing his neck, and chopped down on the throat with the blade of my right hand.

The strike caved in his trachea, and he began silently choking, thrashing beneath me as I held him. I stopped his struggling with another blow to the jugular vein, letting him fall limp. Scanning the area to be sure no one had heard, I pulled off his helmet. He was a solid, stocky human male, with a wide-boned face, twisted grotesquely in the mask of desperation that he'd died with. He was just a bit leaner than me, but the helmet was adjustable and I managed to pull it on and fasten the chinstrap. I jerked the armored vest off of him, deciding I could wear it if I left its velcro chest straps loose. I figured my brown fatigues could pass for his grey ones in the dark, so I grabbed his weapon, quickly covered his body up with brush and dirt and headed at a brisk walk through the woods toward the vehicle. The Machine raged at me from within, eager to hunt through the forest and slaughter every last enemy troop, but I beat it down with

the image of Rachel. If I was going to help her, I needed to be in control.

It took me almost five minutes to locate their ride; they had parked it behind a rise to hide its heat signature from the woods, and I had to use audio sensors to lead me to the general area. No use trying to sneak up on them---either they'd buy my disguise or they wouldn't. I hesitated for just a moment, then strode casually out of the dense trees and around the rise of grassy earth. I was a bit disappointed to find that it was a wheeled cargo truck modified to carry personnel. I'd been hoping for a hopper; but hell, I suppose beggars can't be choosers.

The engine was idling and the lights were off, but I could see, using infrared, that the driver still sat behind the wheel, his door cracked open. Noticing me approaching the driver's side, he levered himself out of the seat and waved genially with one hand, his other filled with a heavy pistol. I waved back, leveled the pulse gun and shot him through the chest. He slumped against the door, slamming it closed before he sank to the ground, leaving a streak of blood on the side of the truck.

I ran up to the truck, kicked his body aside, pulled the door open and jumped behind the wheel. Throwing off my borrowed headgear, I quickly examined the controls, put the vehicle in gear and gave it a shot of the power from the accelerator. It bounced away from the hill with a whine of protest from the turbines, and I fought with the steering wheel to head it toward the farm.

As I took the truck across the rolling farmland, rocks and ruts

jouncing it around like a child's toy, all I could think was that *I* sent her there. *I* was the one who'd put McIntire in my home, with my wife and brother. I'd thought the only threat was from the Cult...I'd thought we could handle them. I never thought that Wellesley would risk a direct attack. We'd all lost so much during the war...I don't think any of us could take losing any more.

A dull, red glow on the horizon was the first sign that told me I was too late. I gave the truck all the power the turbines had, slamming across the hills at over a hundred clicks an hour, desperation gnawing at my guts. I kept seeing my brother Isaac's face as the Tahni slugs slammed into his chest and head. I saw the scratched-out graves of my parents and sister beside the smoldering ruins of their house. All the people I loved who had died around me...

God, I couldn't stand to see it happen again.

It looked even worse when I came within sight of the house. Half the building was gone, blown to bits, its wreckage burning wildly. What remained upright was the local stone we'd put up by hand, standing in solitary memorial like a grave marker. I heard the low moan of a dying animal, not immediately realizing that it had come from me. I was so transfixed by the sight of my destroyed home that I didn't, at first, notice the grey-hulled shuttle sitting behind it, its belly hatch gaping conspicuously open. I had actually stopped the truck, dropped numbly out of the cab before I saw the bodies.

Most of them were CSF mercenaries, Trina Wellesley's goon squad, just like the ones who'd attacked me in the Old Growth---same gray fatigues, ceramic armor and laser weapons. They'd been shot by

Gauss guns, and pretty accurately, too. There were at least a dozen of them sprawled out across the yard in the front of the house, and three more bodies near the building that I recognized as my deputies, all killed by laserfire. Shamir, Nielsen and Hammond. Pete must have called them out after I left. Ari Shamir, who'd named his first son after me; Carrie Nielsen, who'd gone out with my brother for a year before she married someone else; and Noryuki Hammond, the oldest deputy on the force---he'd been with the constabulary since before the war, had fought beside me when we took back Canaan from the Tahni. Two men and a woman, all with families, but all I could think of then was my own family.

"Cal?" The voice was tentative, weak. My head snapped around toward the shuttle, and I saw Pete coming out from behind the nose gear, a Gauss rifle held limply in his right hand. His helmet was off, revealing a face twisted with pain and drained of emotion, and the left side of his fatigues was soaked with blood from a laser wound in his side, and another in his leg.

"Jesus, Pete!" I ran up to him, putting an arm around him to support him before he fell down. "God, we've got to get you to a medic..."

"Don't worry about me," he gasped, his breathing labored. "Got to get help for Rachel..."

My gut froze and I felt like I might pass out.

"Where is she?"

"In the shuttle," he told me. I lowered him gently to the ground, then turned and sprinted up the shuttle's ramp.



Two more CSF types were laid out at the top of the ramp, their brains blown out by a laser, but I hardly saw them as passed through the equipment bay into the troop compartment. At the back of the hold was Kara McIntire, seemingly unhurt, leaning over a coffin-like automedic. I ran up to her without a word, pushing her aside to get a look through the clear plastic lid.

Suspended in a biotic fluid within the AI-guided device, Rachel looked very dead, her eyes closed peacefully, her breathing stopped. I didn't want to look at the ragged hole high on the right side of her chest, eerily bloodless in the stasis of the suspension fluid, didn't want to see the ruin where her right arm used to be, but I couldn't look away. It drew me in, grabbing my heart and brutally twisting it, until I felt the gorge rising in my stomach and I had to turn and find a corner to vomit in.

The bile poured out of me in a wave of staggering nausea that I hadn't experienced since I saw my brother die ten years ago. It was like every nightmare I'd ever had coming to life, and all I felt capable of doing was screaming and sobbing my guts out like a baby. Everything was darkness and the bitter taste of gorge, and I felt like I was going to black out when the stinging clap of a sharp blow across my face shocked me back to my senses.

I shook my head, forced my eyes open, and saw Kara McIntire standing over me, her hand poised to strike another blow. I grabbed her wrist, slamming her against the bulkhead as I rose to my feet, a wave of anger washing away the enclosing shock.

"This is because of you, you Goddamned bitch!" I screamed at her,

pounding her against the hull. "She's dead because of you!"

"Shut the fuck up!" She backhanded me across the face, staggering me, and I snarled wildly, going for my pistol. Amazingly, she was faster, the muzzle of her pulse pistol appearing below my nose before I could clear holster. "Just shut up for a second before I have to blow your damned head off!"

Taking a deep breath, I let the Gauss pistol settle back into its holster.

"She's not dead!" McIntire yelled at me. "She needs to get to a hospital! Now are you going to help her, or do you want to play some more fucking headgames until it's too late and she does die?"

I stared at her for a long, tense moment as the rational part of my brain bit and clawed its way back into control.

"Get my brother on board," I told her with a voice that seemed to come from someone else. Then I turned and headed for the cockpit.

Falling into the pilot's seat, I found the control board still powered up and activated the sensors. There was the CSF hopper, about three clicks away and heading right for us. They must have finally realized that I'd hijacked their truck.

"Are you on board?" I yelled back to the troop compartment.

"We're clear," Kara's voice answered.

"Strap in," I ordered, hitting the controls to raise the ramp, then powering up the thrusters. It was only a few seconds before the boards went green, and I fed power to the belly jets.

The shuttle rose from the ground on columns of fire and I felt the deck rumbling beneath me as I shifted power to the aft engines. The

aerospacecraft kicked me in the pants, jumping forward across the three clicks almost before I could bring up the weapons board.

The hopper didn't even have a chance to radio us before I hit the firing stud. A blinding flash of artificial lightning connected us for a brief moment and then the enemy flyer disintegrated in an incandescent fireball, showering the furrowed sod beneath us with a glowing hail of molten metal as we shot past, heading for town. I left the weapons up, activated the commo board and found the Constabulary frequency.

"Jason," I transmitted, hoping that the CSF gear would overcome any jamming still in place. "Jason, this is Cal."

"Cal!" I heard his reply but didn't look away from the controls to see the holo of his face that I knew was projected above the commo board. "What's going on? I've been trying to get a hold of you for the last half-hour. Wellesley and Kurisawa have been..."

"No questions now, Jase," I shook my head. "I want you to have a medical team ready to meet me at the spaceport in five minutes. I'll be in the CSF berth. Mitchell out."

I gripped the control sticks tightly, trying to stay focused, trying to keep from fading out again. I had some things to do before I could let myself deal with this. Deep inside of me, the Killing Machine that hadn't seen the light of day since the war was screaming to life, and someone was going to regret it.

Because more than anything else in my life, there was one thing I was sure of---I was one of the deadliest human beings that ever lived.

## Interlude: New Jerusalem

The cloaked figures glided swiftly through the back alleys, wraiths that seemed not to touch the ground, the rain parting in their wake as if it were afraid to touch them. Other than the handful of ghostly travelers, the streets were empty, perhaps because of the weather or perhaps because people sensed the tension that pressed down on the city like a smothering hand.

Either way, there were no eyes upon the travelers as they ducked through a side entrance into an abandoned pre-war grain storehouse at the edge of town. The door should have been sealed, but the imposing security lock that stretched across its breadth was a hollow mock-up that parted to the touch. As the door swung shut behind them, a light winked on in the ceiling above and a dozen more robed figures flashed into existence with its illumination, arrayed in a semicircle around the entrance.

One of the travellers stepped forward and threw back her hood, baring her features to the harsh glare of the light and spilling out a mane of flowing dark hair. She was a soft-featured woman with the young-yet-ageless face of someone who'd undergone reconstruct surgery and emerald eyes that seemed to shine from within.

"Greetings, my brothers," she nodded solemnly to those in the circle. "I bring before you the initiates."

She nodded to those she'd entered with and they threw back their hoods, revealing faces markedly less striking than hers. The oldest of

the three boys couldn't have been more than twenty, and though they were all trying their best to conceal it, fear was writ plain in the whites of their widened eyes.

At the center of the robed half-circle, the tallest of the figures paced out of formation to approach the young men, towering over them imposingly. Voluminous sleeves fell away from heavily-muscled forearms as the man reached up to pull back his hood, shaking his blond tresses into their normal order. The boys gasped collectively and fell to their knees, faces against the floor.

"We aren't worthy, your holiness," one of the youths declared, still kissing the dust-covered ground.

"Up, my children," Kevin Fourcade reached down to pull one of the boys to his feet, and the others followed hesitantly, still reluctant to stare into the High Priest's cyan gaze. "In these troubled times, any of the chosen brave enough to suffer through our persecution will be treated as out brothers and sisters."

"Yes, sir," the oldest of the boys nodded. There was an earnestness of blind belief and open worship to his demeanor that his fear couldn't mask. "You honor us."

"As we are honored by your faith," Fourcade replied smoothly, stepping back into line with the others. "But even in these times of hardship, we must remember that the promise of the return is nigh at hand, and we must cling to our beliefs and our tradition. Are you prepared for the ceremony?"

"We are," they responded as one, as the priestess had instructed them.

"Show to us the symbol of your faith," Fourcade intoned solemnly.

The boys glanced at each other nervously, hesitating for a moment before they reached for the fastenings of their robes and dropped them to the floor. Each was naked beneath the grey garment, and each wore on his chest the inlaid holographic image of the Alpha Centauri system, applied only hours before at a downtown parlor.

"We see your faith and reveal our own," the semicircle chanted in unison. A dozen robes dropped as one, with a pale flash of heavily-muscled bodies and holographic tattoos. The three boys felt suddenly inadequate set against the augmented physiques of the Cultists. Only the priestess remained clothed---according to their custom, Cult Priestesses could only disrobe in the presence of another female.

"Under normal circumstances," Fourcade said, addressing the novitiates, "you would all serve a probationary period under the watch of a priestess, but events have outpaced our traditions. Within a few days, we will be asked to strike a blow against the unbelievers who surround us." Fourcade's face was suddenly grim. "I must tell you that many of us may not survive. But the infidels must be taught that they cannot show such disrespect to our Fathers and not reap the consequences. It is not the indignities which I have suffered that are important. I am but a servant. No, what is worth my life and your lives is the will of our Fathers."

"The Ancients shall return," the semicircle chanted.

"Since the unbelievers already know this," Fourcade continued, approaching closer to the initiates and slipping an arm around one of the boys, "I am finally allowed to share it with you. For over a year, I

have taken the return on faith, believing that which I could not see. But not long ago, before I came to shepherd the flock on this world, I was granted an honor few humans can claim." He paused for effect.

"With my own eyes, I have seen the face of our Fathers." A gasp went up, not just from the initiates but from some in the circle, and one of the boys fell to his knees. "The Ancients have returned, my brothers and sister. They are among us, and soon they will take their rightful place and lead us into a new age." Fourcade's eyes seemed to glow brighter in the dimness of the warehouse, twin stars burning with cold fire. "Those who live through the battles to come will take their rightful place by their side. Those who fall will rest in the sublime peace of the knowledge they have helped bring about the return of the Ancients."

"The Ancients shall return." The chant was loud and defiant, as if they were daring any outsider to discover them. "The Ancients shall return!"

Fourcade smiled as he listened to them, fingering the input jack behind his ear. Mitchell had taken something from him that he could never recover. Whether or not he survived, Mitchell was going to know what that felt like.

## Chapter Four

"Get her and Pete to the Church Hospital in Mount Carmel," I told Jason, watching the medical team unload the automed off the shuttle. Armed deputies guarded the entrance to the thick-walled landing bay, staring cautiously at the curious passers-by. "I don't want them anywhere around the city. And have a round-the-clock guard put on the place---heavy weapons, armed hoppers, the works."

"Anything you say," he muttered, still visibly shaken by the sight of Rachel's injuries. "What...what will you be doing?"

"Ms. Wellesley seemed awfully anxious to meet Captain McIntire. I think it's time I introduced them." Kara regarded me silently, leaning tiredly against a support column.

"Cal..." Jason was hunting for the words, but couldn't seem to find them. "Don't get yourself killed."

"Miles to go before I sleep," I told him. "Take care of my wife and brother." I clapped him on the arm, then headed back toward the shuttle. I didn't look to see if McIntire followed; I knew she would.

I was strapped into the pilot's seat, powering up the engines when Kara dropped into the right-hand acceleration couch. I knew she was staring at me, but I didn't look up.

"Aren't you afraid they'll override and take over the controls?" she asked me quietly.

I finally turned to face her. "They already tried. I burned out the override circuits on the way to the spaceport. Check the weapons



locker for me, will you?"

"You have a plan, or are we just playing this by ear?"

"Of course I have a plan." I hit the controls to raise the ramp. "We fly to the CSF's orbital center, shoot our way in, find Trina Wellesley and kill her."

"Oh, and that'll solve all our problems?" She regarded me with obvious skepticism.

"No." I grinned the grin of a bare skull. "But it'll make me feel better. Especially since the next part of the plan involves stealing a starship and running like hell." I couldn't help but laugh at the expression on her face as I hit the belly jets and we rocketed out of the landing bay. Some people just can't appreciate a simple plan.

\* \* \*

"I can't believe they're just letting us approach like this." Kara shook her head, eyes glued to the viewscreen and the view there of the huge Council Station. Headquarters for all Corporate activity in the sector, it was the largest of the three orbital stations that circled Canaan.

The gigantic wheel of the habitat rotated slowly around the thick girth of the hub, which held the docking bays and workshops, while orbital transfer vehicles flitted here and there, heading back and forth between the Council Station and the other orbitals. At odd intervals, cargo capsules would rocket up from the surface, boosted by the laser launch system, to be captured by tugs, which would gather them together to be towed outsystem.

Somewhere in the midst of all that peaceful-looking machinery

were some really nasty weapons systems, but none of them had so much as fired a warning shot at us so far.

"They must know by now that we took their shuttle," McIntire said.

"Of course they do," I agreed. "But our computer has this crazy idea that we're a transport from the Commonwealth Orbital Station, carrying a Patrol Inspector on a goodwill visit. It even got the correct clearance codes somehow."

"And how did it get that idea?" She grinned conspiratorially.

"Got me." I spread my hands helplessly. "I've never understood computers."

We came into the docking cylinder on computer control---I'd sufficiently brainwashed the shuttle to trust it to the task---and I paid special attention to the other spacecraft hugging the central transport core. A couple of huge cargo ships took up the bulk of the room, with short-range shuttles like ours filling a dozen or so of the gaps between them. My eyes, however, were glued to the craft docked near the entrance to the cylinder, nestled innocuously between one of the cargo ships and a squat tug.

Delta-winged and massing only about a thousand metric tons, it could have been easily mistaken for a shuttle---but I knew different. It was a starship, though about as small a starship as could be built.

"See that?" I asked McIntire.

She nodded. "A courier. Perfect, especially if it's armed."

"Well, let's not ask for too much just yet," I cautioned. "But it's a hell of a lot better than the next best thing."

Our shuttle finally nuzzled up to a free juncture on the transport

tube, the maneuvering thrusters nudging us gently up against it until it locked down on the external airlock. The station computer wished us a nice stay at the Council Center as we wriggled free of our harness, kicking loose into the zero-g. I remember how queasy I got my first time in null grav---now, with the wartime modifications to my inner ear, I didn't even get the falling sensation.

We paused at the weapons locker on the way to the airlock, each of us grabbing one of the pulse carbines and a bandoleer of spare magazines and stashing them in a tool bag. Our sidearms we concealed beneath our jackets before we exited the airlock. It wouldn't pass through any detectors, but maybe we could bluff our way through for a while. I honestly didn't care.

The transport tube was crowded with technicians in work utilities darting here and there, propelling themselves forward using the handholds mounted on the transplas wall at regular intervals. They didn't give us a second look as we kicked out of the airlock, heading for the lifts into the habitat wheel. I was trying my best to look like I belonged and maintain a bored, "how-much-longer-before-I-get-off" worker kind of face, while I kept up an active sensor scan. First sign of trouble and I would start shooting.

But much to my surprise, we passed through to the lift banks unmolested, boarding a car for the Corporate Security Force offices. I carefully scanned the dozen or so other occupants of the lift, but they appeared to be nothing but ordinary clerical workers, absorbed with the mundane details of their jobs. I picked up scattered conversation on such planet-shattering topics as Council vacation plans and

corporate seniority before I stopped listening.

I glanced around at Captain McIntire, wondering how she could take all this so calmly. If we lived through this, I'd have to ask her just what she had done for a living before she became a mineral scout.

"Hey," I said quietly, getting her attention.

"Yeah?" She looked over at me.

"About what I said back at my house..." I trailed off hesitantly. "I wanted to tell you I was sorry."

"It's okay," she chuckled sadly. "You were about half right, anyway."

I didn't pursue the subject any further, figuring the surroundings weren't appropriate. A muted chiming in the liftcar warned us that one wall of the car was about to become the floor, as the vehicle travelled down the spoke and "out" became "down." We and the other occupants aligned ourselves accordingly, and shortly felt the *faux* gravity of centrifugal force begin to pull us to the padded floor. Its pull grew steadily stronger as we approached the outer layers of the wheel, until it reached about half a gee, which was as heavy as it got on this station. Wimps.

It took the liftcar almost ten minutes to reach the CSF center, out on the last level of the wheel, and, by the time it did, our car was almost empty. We exited the lift, went to an office guide on the wall and looked up Investigator Wellesley's office.

"You sure this is a good idea?" McIntire muttered to me as we headed down the wide corridor.

"Up to you," I said. "You think you can take the ship alone, go

ahead. But three of my deputies---my *friends*---are dead, three people with husbands and wives and children. Dead because Wellesley wanted to get her hands on you." I felt a twinge of guilt---I'd told myself I wasn't going to blame this on Kara. I shook my head. "What it comes down to is that my wife's lying in a hospital with her arm blown off...and I'm going to go kill something."

"Oh, what the hell?" she said, shrugging. "I've been living on borrowed time for the last twenty years."

There were a few armed CSF guards along the corridor, but none of them gave us a sideways glance as we passed. I was beginning to experience *deja vu* for the days of the Glory Boys, when I would pass this close to Tahni shocktroops, hidden only by the darkness and my combat suit's chameleon circuits. I felt incredibly naked, but not afraid. There was no fear in the machine I had become, only an anticipation of the kill.

Finally, we came to the CSF Investigator's suite of offices, entering through the double doors as they slid aside to admit us. The suite was only sparsely populated, a couple of receptionists occupying the desks in the outer office, while a lone netdiver was nestled in her immersion station. Maybe we'd caught them during a shift change...and maybe not. I suddenly felt very paranoid.

I ran a thermal scan through the door labeled with Wellesley's name and title, marking way too many heat sources for my peace of mind, but in one of the unmarked side offices there was just one, lone thermal signature... I stepped forward as if nothing were amiss, was about to make a cut for the side office when they hit us with the sonic.

It was something like slamming headfirst into a bulkhead---I doubled over and pitched headfirst to the ground, my whole body screaming in agony from the subsonic vibrations coursing through me. Only my headcomp kept me from blacking out. As it was, I could do little but roll around on the floor, moaning incoherently, my vision fading in and out. I clawed helplessly for my pistol, but strong hands jerked it and the tool bag away, and I was dimly aware that I was surrounded by a group of figures in shielded helmets. As the hidden sonic stunner cut off, my subconscious was screaming at me, *Sucker!*

Rolling onto my back, trying to shake loose of the stupor, I looked up into the muzzles of half a dozen pulse pistols, and the gloating face of Trina Wellesley. I wasn't sure which sight was more unpleasant.

"One nice thing about you backwater colony types," she said.  
"You're all so predictable."

The Corporate mercenaries behind me reached down to pull me up by the armpits, and I endeavored at that moment to prove just how *unpredictable* we backwater colony types could be by catching their forearms in a grip against my sides and doing a backflip over their heads. Caught off guard, the CSF goons in front of me fired in a panic, their shots chopping into their own troops.

I threw the mercs' bodies forward into the shooters, then leapt in myself, slashing wide with my talons. As I spun, slicing through the throat---armor and all---of a tall female, I clearly saw Kara McIntire point her left index finger at one of the mercs. From the tip of her finger a crackling laserbolt pulsed, catching the man in the visor and putting a hole through both the transplas shield and his forehead.

Then things became too hectic for me to give what I'd seen serious consideration, as the remaining two troopers tried to back away and get a better shot at us. I caught one by her gun arm, amputated it with a downward slash of my right talons, caught the falling forearm and pointed it at her compatriot, squeezing her finger on the trigger. The heavy pistol shot a three-round burst that blew a fist-sized hole through the man's visor, while the disarmed woman collapsed, screaming in agony, her stump spraying me with bright, arterial blood.

Wellesley let out a shrill scream, turning to bolt for the door as the "secretaries" drew compact pistols and popped off a volley of laserfire at us. McIntire took them out with a burst from her implanted laser, spun to put a round through the head of the Netdiver, while I made a lunge for Wellesley.

Before I could reach her, a squad of Corporate mercs burst through the suite entrance in a confused panic, laying down a swath of laserpulses that blanketed the room. I threw myself forward, emptying the magazine of my appropriated pistol into the troops. My flurry of shots cut through three of them, bunched up as they were, and McIntire sniped two more with her finger while she retrieved one of our carbines from the discarded equipment bag.

The remainder of them, spooked by their sudden losses, tried to retreat from the room, but I launched myself into them talons-first. Two of them went down with their throats torn before they could take two steps, and I shattered another's spine with a kick, while a burst of carbine-fire from McIntire took out the remaining two.

Lunging over to the control desk, I quickly found the control that closed the security doors. The heavy, duralloy portal slammed down with a crash of metal and I turned to look for Wellesley. I found her quickly---she hadn't gone another step after the mercs had opened fire. She was laying face-down in a pool of her own blood, her upper torso riddled from the mercenaries' wild gunfire.

"Damn," I breathed softly. I felt a bit cheated---I'd wanted to kill her myself. It was something of a letdown, finding myself standing in the middle of the CSF offices, surrounded by dead bodies, and suddenly realizing that I had no idea of what to do next.

"What now?" Kara fixed me with a frankly curious stare.

"We've got to get into the security system," I decided, stepping over to the station where the netdiver had been sitting. His body was half-sprawled over the chair, and I pushed it aside, falling into his seat.

I studied the console, probed it with my neurolink and found the frequency to access it. My systems penetration program ran automatically, worming its way into the main datalink, and I found that the netdiver had made my job easier---he'd been linked into the security system when Kara'd shot him. Presumably he'd been set up to alert the guards in case anything went wrong, but it left the whole network wide open to me, and I took advantage of that to find out just what was going on.

At the moment, station security had been alerted to intruders in the CSF suite, and reinforcements were on their way. They'd also launched assault shuttles, and blocked any ships from leaving the docking cylinder. Fortunately, I was in a position to change that.



Using the security command system, I called off the alert at the CSF offices, issuing a new one for the medical center, on the opposite side of the wheel. I gave the assault shuttles new orders, sending them to Canaan's spaceport, and lifted the alert at the docking bay, liberally sprinkling alerts on every level, trying to draw guards away from the route we'd have to take to the bay.

Before I left the net, I switched over to the docking control systems and accessed the file on the star courier we'd seen. Its name was the *Hecate*, and, ironically enough, it was registered as Trina Wellesley's private transport. I used the station's docking computer link to access the ship's AI, reprogrammed its security system to include myself and Captain McIntire, and ordered the ship to begin prepping for takeoff, setting the jump capacitors to begin charging.

That done, I withdrew my consciousness from the link, went over to the merc whose spine I had shattered and began stripping off his armor. His body was oddly twisted in mid-torso, like a cat stretching itself...or a broken doll.

"Your fatigues should pass," I decided, looking at McIntire's gray utilities. "Grab some armor and a helmet. We've got to get to that ship before they figure out what I've done."

We quickly pulled on the armored vests and gloves, found helmets that would fit us, and buckled on the mercenaries' gunbelts, replacing their sidearms with our own. I retrieved one of the pulse carbines, handed the other to McIntire, then stepped over to the door controls.

"Ready?" I asked her, hand poised over the button.

"Not really." She brought her carbine up to chest level.

I hit the control, raising the shielded door, then spun around with my pulse gun ready. Nothing. The corridor outside was deserted, probably intentionally---Wellesley had outsmarted herself, evacuating the area in anticipation of our arrival. It had gotten all non-combatants out of the firezone, but it had left no one around to raise an alarm.

I hit the outer door control and shut the carnage in before we set out for the lift station at a brisk trot. I could hear alarms ringing in the distance, but I spotted no other CSF guards until we came within sight of the lift banks. Posted there were a pair of armored mercs, apparently checking people out as they boarded.

I halted McIntire with a hand on her shoulder, touching helmets so I could whisper to her without using the radio.

"Try to bluff it," I told her. "If we can't, do them as quietly as possible."

She nodded, and we advanced on the lift station, strolling casually up like we owned the place. I nodded to the guards as we approached, started to board the waiting car, but one of them stepped up to us.

"Where are you headed?" the man asked over my helmet radio.

"Docking bay," I told him. "We're checking out an alert there."

"I thought that one was canceled," he said, then seemed to relax, shaking his head. "Look, do you two have any idea just what the hell's going on with all these damn alerts?"

I shrugged expressively. "Hey, I just do what I'm told. Probably a computer glitch."

"You still up for Donnegal's tonight, Frank?" the other guard asked me. I froze for a second, realizing that he must recognize the name etched across my helmet.

"Uh...sure," I nodded. "No problem."

"I'm sure looking forward to slamming down some brews after a shift like this," the first guard sighed.

"Yeah," I laughed, trying to sound natural, "you and me both."

He seemed to stiffen, his pulse carbine coming up quickly, and I suddenly had this blinding flash of insight that this guy Frank must not drink. I was about to try and jump away and get in a position to take him out when I heard a sharp "crack," and saw a small, blackened hole magically appear in the visor. I didn't have to look to know that the laser had come out of McIntire's implant weapon---she'd used it instead of the carbine because it wasn't as loud and didn't have as much of a visual signature.

The headshot guard collapsed back against the wall and started to slide down it before the other man realized what was happening. Before he could react, I extended my right-hand talons, their ultrasharp blades ripping through the material of the gloves I had appropriated, and sliced through his jugular vein with a flick of my wrist.

I shoved him backwards into the open lift car, McIntire pulling the other corpse in as I hit the touch-pad to close the doors and select our destination. I looked quickly around the car, found the security camera, and blasted it with a burst from my carbine. Hopefully, if anyone noticed, they'd think it had malfunctioned. Not that I thought

anyone *would* notice---the monitors were in the CSF offices.

McIntire raised her visor, regarding me with an amused expression. I tugged off my helmet for a moment and wiped the sweat off my face, glancing at her uncomfortably.

I finally gave in. "All right. Just what's so funny?"

"The fact we're still alive," she laughed quietly.

"Don't get used to the idea," I warned her, slipping the headgear back on.

The lift was about halfway to the docking cylinder when it slowed to a halt and the doors slid open. McIntire and I tensed, bringing up our weapons, but it was only a harried-looking clerical worker---a short, skinny little man whose eyes bugged out at the sight of our carbines. His attention was so fixed on the muzzles of our weapons, he didn't even notice the bodies of the CSF guards---he just slowly backed out of the car and the doors slid shut. I let out a sigh and I heard Kara laugh quietly.

The rest of our ride went uninterrupted, gravity cutting out a little past the halfway point, and we arrived at the transport core after ten minutes of tense silence. We were braced for an attack as the doors opened, but no one even noticed our arrival---the docking bay was a buzz of harried activity, with CSF mercenaries jetting here and there, trying, I supposed, to untangle the morass of alerts and counteracting orders I'd put into place.

I moved out of the lift with McIntire at my heels, pausing to give the car a new destination so it would carry our victims away from the transport core. We kicked away from the closing doors just as a group

of CSF troopers floated up to them, their leader proceeding to curse us vociferously.

"Goddamnit!" he yelled at us, slamming a hand onto the recall control. "We've been waiting for that car! Which squad are you shitheads with?"

We tried to ignore him, catching a handhold on the wall, and shoving ourselves farther down the transport core; but as I floated away, I saw the doors to the lift reopen, a cloud of crimson globules drifting out of it.

"What the fuck?" I could hear the CSF squadleader exclaim. "Stop them!"

A couple of the troopers squeezed off bursts of laserfire at us, but the core was crowded with people and the shots that didn't spall the clear, transplas walls around us hit other guards and CSF employees. Shouts and screams erupted all around us, and everyone scattered in different directions. McIntire and I kept increasing our pace, shoving off of each handhold with more power until I began to have serious worries about us being able to stop.

We didn't even try to fire back at the mercs---we couldn't hit them any more than they could hit us, and the last thing we wanted to do was attract any attention to us while we looked just like everyone else. Flying through the panicked crowd of workers and security troops, I was hoping we'd lose ourselves, but the tenacious CSF squadleader kept his group on us at a consistent fifty-meter distance, unable to fire because of the bystanders.

Finally, we came within sight of the courier's docking ring, the

little craft visible through the thick, transparent core walls. We began to slow ourselves down, catching furtively at the handholds until we jerked to a halt directly across from the hatch to the docking umbilical.

"Hold them for a second." I handed McIntire my carbine, kicking across to the access hatch.

While I worked the control panel, Captain McIntire opened up with both weapons, scattering our pursuers and everyone else in the area. I typed in the I.D. code I'd read off the security net, then let the scanner take a look at my retina to confirm the pattern I'd programmed in at the control center. The board went green and the hatch popped open with a soft hiss.

"Come on!" I called to McIntire, drawing my pistol to give her cover.

She glanced at me, then looked back at the CSF guards long enough to empty both carbines before she kicked off from the wall and shot across through the open hatch into the docking umbilical. I fired off a volley at the group of mercs approaching us before I ducked in after her, pulling the hatch closed and locking it after us.

Brushing past the scout captain, I palmed the airlock's security panel. It read my palmprint, again installed through the command net, and the outer and inner lock doors slid aside, allowing us into the ship's equipment locker. I turned and hit the control to close the lock while Kara paused to stow the carbines in an equipment locker. The interior of the little ship was cramped, and I had to squeeze past her to worm my way down the narrow corridor to the cockpit.

Pulling myself into the pilot's seat, I powered the acceleration couch forward and strapped in as McIntire moved into the cockpit. She halted herself above the copilot's seat, frowning at me.

"How long's it been since you flew a starship?" she asked me suspiciously. "Maybe you should let me..."

I shook my head, cutting her off. "You don't know where we're going and we don't have time to argue---strap in."

She clambered resentfully into the right-hand couch while I linked with the ship's A.I., taking over its navigational and helm systems, leaving the rest for my unwilling copilot. Kara, I saw out of the corner of my eye, was plugging the 'face jack from her station into a socket behind her right ear, and I felt her, through the net, linking with weapons, life support and commo. Good. At least she was a professional.

I separated the ship from the docking umbilical over the automated protests of both the station computer and the *Hecate's* built-in manufacturer's safety warnings that I didn't have clearance to leave. I overrode the ship's safeties and ignored the station, concentrating instead on nudging us away from the transport core with the maneuvering thrusters.

Faint banging sounds echoed through the hull as the chemical jets pushed us gently out into the open periphery of the docking cylinder, and I could see on the main viewscreen the station crewmen shooting around willy-nilly with their little hand-held gas jets, trying to get out of the way. I gave the rear maneuvering jets a short blast, and the courier headed forward, toward the open end of the cylinder and the

starry freedom outside of it.

"Attention courier *Hecate*," came an annoyed voice over the cockpit speakers, not accompanied by a holo image. "You are not cleared to depart the station. Return to dock immediately."

I ignored the order, instead powering up the ship's fusion plant, a 150-Megawatt jobber with an onboard fuel supply of metallic hydrogen that could last a year. The second the monitors went green, I started feeding power to the jump capacitors. We'd probably need them fast, when we needed them, and they took too Goddamned long to charge. Military scouts and attack ships usually kept them charged at all times, but that was too inefficient and dangerous for a civilian craft.

"Attention, courier *Hecate*." The voice was sounding more and more pissed off every second. "Return to dock immediately. You will not be allowed to leave the docking bay---we will close the bay doors if you do not turn back immediately."

Even as he spoke, I could see the massive, articulated iris of the cylinder doors beginning to dilate inward, and I knew we'd never make it in time---not on maneuvering thrusters anyway. Cursing softly to myself, I cut off the flow of energy to the superconducting capacitors and fed a burst directly to the twin Teller-Fox warp units.

The warp unit was originally developed shortly before the Second Interstellar War, by Catherine Teller and Lamar Fox, to create a smaller, temporary version of the wormhole jumpgates we'd been using since the latter half of the Twenty-first Century. The comparatively low energy state of Transition Space for which the



warper opened the way meant journeys of weeks or months, rather than the instantaneous travel the wormholes allowed---that was the price for being able to enter T-space at will, and one we'd been happy to pay. But the gravimetric warp field that the unit emitted had several other applications that its inventors hadn't even dreamed of.

The first was as a defense shield, since the field warped all electromagnetic energy, diverting energy beams and radiation away from it to a certain extent. The second was as a source of variable, artificial gravity, though---for reasons my physics teachers could never adequately explain to me---this effect could only be utilized while in T-Space. God knows they've *tried* to make it work in realspace; antigravity would be such a handy thing to have.

But it was the third effect that I was interested in at the moment. It seemed that by feeding the warp unit pulsed jolts of energy in a certain wave pattern, you could create a gravimetric wave front that would spit your vessel out like a watermelon seed---kind of a cosmic boat propeller. This made quite a handy tool for larger starships, saving on all the room that used to be taken up by reaction mass, but it wasn't often you saw the capability on a craft as small as a courier.

The impeller effect did have a couple drawbacks, the first being that you couldn't use it within the gravitational pull of anything larger than a medium-massed asteroid as it would tend to pull you just as far toward the center of mass of any large body as possible. The other little problem was that if there was anything *smaller* than an asteroid around within, say, a half a klick, the same function of the warp that made it such a great defense shield would push that matter away, and

rather violently.

The long and the short of it was, when I gunned the *Hecate* out of the docking cylinder, it blew the whole bay to hell.

Rocketing out into the Big Black, I switched to the rear screens and saw huge gouts of flame and debris shooting out of the end of the cylinder, I guessed from where our drive field had touched one of the shuttles and blown its fuel supply. I felt a cold lump in the pit of my stomach as I realized what would happen if the huge metallic hydrogen stores on one of those big freighters were to ignite...

Almost as if some ill-tempered god were reading my mind, a blinding, incandescent explosion tore through the heart of the station, consuming the docking cylinder and starting a shock wave that spread up the "spokes" of the habitat wheel, shattering them like glass rods. Air blasted through hull breaches in streams of ice particles and caught fire in other places, expanding from pinpoints of light to glowing jets of flame. The wheel itself didn't come apart---its structure was too sturdy---but the explosion threw it visibly off its equilibrium, its spin sending it wobbling out of its high orbit. If they didn't get an evac crew up there in a few hours, the whole thing was going to hit atmosphere and burn itself up.

I looked for grief somewhere in my soul, looked for a spark of guilt or regret, but there was none. I was the Killing Machine again, and the Machine felt no guilt or regret. I knew on an intellectual level that there could have been innocent people in that station, but it had no meaning. This was a war, and I was a weapon.

I glanced aside to McIntire, expecting shock or horror on her face,

but she was expressionless. She could have been watching a game of Cyberball for all the emotion she showed. Somehow, I felt that she was even more of a machine than I was.

I was so engrossed in watching her and the explosion, I didn't notice the incoming assault shuttles coming around Canaan's horizon until the ship's tactical computer gave me a mental nudge.

"Company," I muttered. "They must have gotten an alert out to the shuttles."

"We could outrun them on impellers," McIntire suggested.

"Them, yeah." I nodded readily. "But we're not going to be able to outrun the Patrol cutters they call out while we're buzzing around insystem. In case you haven't noticed, we just destroyed a multimillion credit Corporate Council orbital station and probably killed several hundred people. I'm not up on all the federal ordinances, but I think that might just be against the law."

"So what's *your* idea, war hero?" she wanted to know.

"We need a place to hide," I told her. "For a few hours. While we finish charging the capacitors, and I finish sifting through this thing's navigational computer." I scanned the sensor boards for the location of the assault shuttles, then turned the scanners the opposite direction, nodded in satisfaction. "And I think I know just the place."

## Interlude: Canaan

Rachel Mitchell flexed the fingers of her right hand tentatively, staring at the limb in unabashed wonder. When she had last seen the arm, in the brief moments before she'd passed out, it had lay meters away from her, blown off by a burst of laserfire.

But that was long days ago, and the medics at the Mt. Carmel hospital had done a marvelous job assembling her new arm. *Assembling* was the correct word. Cloned bone tissue, infused with ceramic to make it much harder to ever break again, had been wrapped with cloned muscle and flesh. Superconductive hardwired threads had replaced nerves, attached by an implanted microcomputer and neurolink to her brain. The arm was stronger, its reflexes faster, and its sense of touch a hundred times more sensitive than the original could ever have been, yet it still felt *unreal* somehow.

"All right, Mrs. Mitchell." Gregov Bellot, her physical therapist, gently took her new right arm by the wrist. "Let's see how the graft is coming along." She tried to smile politely as he bent and stretched her arm from the shoulder down to the wrist, pushing it just to that shadowy line where discomfort came within a few millimeters of pain. Bellot was a jolly, well-meaning little man who sort of reminded her of one of her uncles, but she wouldn't have been startled to discover that the therapist was some distant relative of the Marquis de Sade.

"Very good, very good." Bellot nodded, letting loose of the appendage, his pudgy face beaming. "Now we check dexterity," he

announced cheerfully, as if they hadn't repeated this same ritual every day she'd been there, led her across the room to a table that held a series of puzzles and reflex tests.

"Hey, Rachel." She heard a familiar voice and turned to see Pete coming through the therapy room door, looking none the worse for wear from the serious wounds he'd taken at their house. He'd been treated and released over a week ago, but Jason had kept him at the medical center there at Mt. Carmel to take charge of security. He'd taken the job seriously, as evidenced by the sidearm that had become a regular part of his wardrobe since his release. She'd been happy just to get back into her regular clothes and out of a hospital gown.

"Hi, Pete." She stepped over and gave him a hug, grateful for the interruption in this increasingly boring routine. "Tell me you're here to get me out of this place," she pleaded, only half-joking.

"I wish I could, sis, but Jase wants to wait till things settle down a bit more."

"Is he still having trouble with Kurisawa?" she asked, trying hard to ignore Bellot's impatient foot-tapping.

"Kurisawa, the Corporate Consulate, the Commonwealth Ambassador," Pete snorted. "You name it. He's managed to convince them he doesn't know where Cal and Captain McIntire are, but they're crawling all over our offices, going over the records with an electron microscope. Plus the skingangs are going crazy---they all want revenge for the hit on Cutter's chopshop. There've been at least three street attacks on the Cultists, and we don't have enough people to..." Pete trailed off as he realized that Rachel's attention had drifted away

from his words.

"He'll be okay, Rachel," Pete put a comforting hand on her arm---the new one, and it still felt strange. "Cal can take care of himself---hell, he went on board the CSF station, trashed the damned thing and came out all right. He was the best there was in the war, and he probably knows a thousand hiding places that the Corporates and the feds never heard of." The younger Mitchell smiled with a hint of pride in his eyes. "He's probably leading them on a merry chase right now, trying to draw attention away from us."

"You're right, Pete," she said, trying to match his confidence. "I just wish I could be with him---we always said we'd never be apart again once the war ended."

"He'll be back," Pete assured her. "I know he will. And when he does come back," Pete's voice went hard, "there's gonna' be some serious ass-kicking."

"Is it just me," Bellot stepped over to the window, "or do you hear some kind of chanting?"

\* \* \*

"Look, Inspector." Jason Chen tried to keep his voice level, not wanting to yell at a holographic transmission in front of his deputies. "I don't know how many different ways I can put this so that you'll understand. I don't know where Constable Mitchell is, and he has not contacted me since he took off in the Corporate shuttle. Given the situation, I think it's more likely you'll have information on his whereabouts long before I will. However, I would like to know what you and the Commonwealth ambassador are doing to investigate the

CSF attack on Constable Mitchell's home, which, not incidentally, seriously injured his wife and brother and prompted his attack on the Corporate station?"

"We'll take care of that investigation, Deputy Chen," Kurisawa snapped dismissively. "That is not your concern." His expression seemed to soften a bit. "How is Mrs. Mitchell?"

"She's fine," Jason answered uncertainly, suspicious of the man's motives. "She should be good as new."

"I assume she's out of the hospital, then?"

"We want to keep her there for a while just to be safe."

"Probably a wise idea. At any rate," the Inspector said, his voice becoming business-like once again, "I will notify you if we need to go over your records again or question any of your personnel."

"That's most gracious of you," Chen replied, without half of the sarcasm he felt, then cut the transmission with an angry flick of his hand. "Goddamned feds," he murmured softly, glancing around the room to make sure none of his people had heard it. Feelings were bad enough without adding to the tension.

The booking room of the station, visible through the one-way transplas windows of the main offices, was a vision of chaos. Skingangers, brought in for questioning on the numerous attacks on cultists in the wake of the raid on Cutter's shop, crowded the room, cursing and struggling futilely against their restraints. The main database was still offline from the Patrol and Corporate investigators probe, and more than three-quarters of the regular deputies were tied up answering emergency calls.

This was worse than anything Jason had seen since the war...

"Sir?" Chen heard the reluctant voice of one of his deputies coming over the intercom.

"Yeah?" Jason replied, just as reluctantly.

"There's someone at the front desk to see you."

Jason sighed, rubbing a hand across his face. He hadn't slept in nearly sixty hours.

"All right," he muttered, rising from his desk with a twinge of protest from his tired muscles. "I'm coming."

Jason was loathe to open the door between the offices and the booking room---it was soundproof, and pulling it open was like cracking the gates of Hell. The relative calm and silence of the offices was assaulted by a cacophony of sound and smell---the moans, shouts and snarls of restrained prisoners; the shouted commands and threats of the deputies; the stench of sweat and the pungent stink of urine from skimmers who had voided themselves in protest, too strong for the air conditioning to control.

Chen closed the door behind him, trying to hold his breath as he stepped quickly through the booking area. He kept his eyes straight ahead, ignoring the pleading looks from his subordinates and the curses and challenges of the skinangers alike as he plodded forward. Finally, like Pilgrim emerging from the Slough of Despair, he reached the doorway to the waiting room and pushed through it, shutting it quickly behind him.

Waiting in the front room were various shopowners, farmers and business persons, come to make complaints about vandalism or petty



theft---and a vision straight out of a bad Kickride.

It...he?...was bipedal, with a basically bilateral symmetry, but beyond that, it was difficult to tell the thing had started life as a human being. Jason didn't believe he'd ever seen a more radical case of street surgery---actually, he didn't think that term was accurate, as no common street surgeon could have achieved this level of sophistication.

The thing was over two meters tall and...well, Jason had to start at the feet and work his way up. The legs were almost normal, except for the ceramic armor grown into the skin like some kind of scales, but the feet had been expanded, and the toes lengthened---perhaps with cloned tissue---into vicious talons. He had a *tail*, for God's sake, muscled with bionic servos to make it either a deadly weapon or a platform to allow the use of his feet, and also armored with the ceramic scales.

The torso had been extended with cloned tissue and artificial ribs and spine to make room for an extra set of arms---also a combination of biological tissue and bionics, each hand of the lesser arms fitted with modular digits to allow for delicate electronic operations. The main arms had been extensively built up through bionic servos and cloned muscle tissue implants, and the hands were huge, four-fingered claws plated with armored scales.

Then there was the head. It had been expanded to handle extra brain tissue and fitted with superchargers to feed it air, but that was the least of its modifications. Hard, armored ridges lined the cranium, leading up to a pair of wickedly-curved metal horns. The eyes were

bionic, and buried beneath heavily-ridged brows, while the nose had been reduced to a pair of slots flush against the face. The jaws were strengthened, and when the too-wide mouth opened, it revealed rows of razor-sharp metal teeth.

Feeling for his sidearm, Jason didn't approach till his hand rested on it.

"Are you Deputy Constable Chen?" It *spoke*. Its voice, ironically enough, was almost pleasant.

"Yeah," Jason grunted in reply, just staring at the thing unabashedly.

"I am called Secarius. I must talk to you in private."

"Of course you must," Jason replied numbly, his brain refusing to accept that a creature from his boyhood nightmares was standing there asking for a private conversation with him. "Right this way."

Jason tried to ignore the disbelieving looks in the eyes of the watch officers, attempting not to appear overly concerned as he led the creature that called itself Secarius through the door into the booking area. The moment that Secarius stepped into the room, the bedlam faded like a hard vacuum had hit. Every eye, organic or bionic, was glued to the creature, and Jason had an odd feeling that some of the Skinners seemed to recognize it.

He put that question aside as they passed through the booking area and arrived at the door to the interrogation room. Jason pulled it open, waited for Secarius to enter first. The cyborg had to bend at the waist to make it through the doorway, an unnaturally fluid motion that showed the complexity of its spinal structure. Jason shook his

head as he followed it inside, wondering if the pressure had finally driven him over the edge and this was all a paranoid delusion. Closing the door behind them, he turned to face the thing.

Secarius propped itself up by its tail, crossed both sets of arms and regarded the Deputy Constable evenly---or as evenly as something that looks like a dragon crossed with a scorpion can look.

"So," Jason prompted, "did you have something important to tell me, or are you just new in the neighborhood and wanted to meet the local law enforcement officers?"

"It's fascinating how people change, isn't it Constable Chen?" Secarius said in that incongruously smooth voice. "Not too long ago, I would have charged you for the information I'm about to provide *gratis*. But I'm a different person now, with different goals and a new outlook."

"How nice for you," Chen commented drily. "I feel the same way after a good weekend off."

"Your sense of humor reminds me of another policeman I knew once," Secarius observed. "But I'm afraid you don't have much time for small talk. Mrs. Mitchell is at the Mt. Carmel medical center, with her brother-in-law, Peter."

"How do you..." Jason began.

"For the moment, forget how I know," the creature interrupted, "and concentrate on the inevitable conclusion that if I know, someone else almost certainly does. Someone who is very interested in keeping the things they imagine Kara McIntire may have told you or them a secret."

"Who the fuck *are* you?" Jason demanded, shaking his head. Not even Kurisawa had expressed knowledge of Captain McIntire's involvement in the destruction of the CSF station.

"I am Secarius," he replied calmly. "My name and my new purpose---it's a Latin word, Constable, meaning 'slayer.' What I used to be, until sixteen days ago, was an insignificant street surgeon you knew, only by reputation, as Cutter."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Chen gaped at him. "Cutter died in the raid on the chopshop."

"Yes, he did," the thing agreed readily. "And Secarius was born. I admit, I was a bit miffed about dying, though I have no real memory of it, and I've been taking out some of my frustration on those misguided parties responsible."

"The Cultist killings," Jason muttered in realization.

The huge shoulders shrugged. "Merely a diversion. My real purpose was to find information about the ones behind the Cultists--- the Corporate Council, and their attack dogs in the CSF."

"The Corporates are behind the Cultists?" Jason repeated, frowning deeply.

"It would be obvious to a child if he knew where to look." Secarius smiled, baring a nightmarish double set of centimeters-long teeth--- Jason shuddered at the unbidden thought of them dripping with blood. "But we have not the time to bandy about the many things you do not know. The Cultists and the CSF are on the move, and you and your friends are the targets."

Jason shook his head confidently. "There's security all around that

hospital. No one will be able to get through it."

"I personally," Secarius pointed out, "have not known the CSF to attempt something they do not believe themselves capable of."

Before Jason could fashion a reply, the door to the interrogation room burst open, and Shiella Wolczk, one of the watch officers, exploded through it.

"Constable Chen!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "We just got a call from Mt. Carmel---it's surrounded by Cultists, hundreds of them!"

Jason sprinted out of the room, skidding to a halt in front of the commo board. Peter Mitchell's upper torso floated above it in hologram, a tense frown darkening his features.

"Pete," Jason said to the image, "what the hell's going on there?"

"It's the Predecessor cultists, Jase," Cal's younger brother told him. "I don't know where they came from, but there's gotta' be about three or four hundred of them out there."

"Are they attacking?"

"Not yet," Pete said, shaking his head. "They're just sitting out there, chanting something."

"Can you give me a feed from one of the hoppers?"

"Just a minute." Pete's image disappeared from the pickup, and, after a moment, was replaced by an aerial view of the medical center.

Mt. Carmel was a gently-sloped hill, flattened at the top, with the blockish buildings of the planetary medical center jutting out from it like white-walled obelisks. The shot Jason received started out about two hundred meters up, catching the eerie play of shadows and half-light from the reflectors, and Jason couldn't be sure what the line of

pale white light surrounding the base of the hill really was.

Then the hopper arced gently downward, into a low, slow flyby of the hill, and the true nature of the line of light was revealed: scores upon hundreds of Predecessor cultists lined up single file, surrounding the base of the hill, each of them carrying a chemical glowrod. Jason couldn't hear any audio, but the white-robed acolytes seemed to be swaying to some kind of chant, circling slowly clockwise around the hill.

"Pete," Jason called, "can you still hear me?"

"I'm here, Jase," Pete's voice came over the hopper view. "What do you want us to do?"

"I have..." Jason began, glancing back at Secarius with the briefest of hesitations, "...information that an attack is imminent, maybe from the cultists, maybe from somewhere else. I want you to put the guards on alert, then I want you to put Rachel in a hopper and take her out of there ASAP."

"Don't you want me to stay and coordinate the defense?" The younger Mitchell's voice was plaintive, and Jason could imagine the disappointed frown on the young man's face.

"Negative, Pete," Jason insisted. "You and Rachel are the targets of the attack. Get her the hell out of there now! I'll be flying up to take control of the defense."

"Yes, sir," Pete assented reluctantly. "I'll call you back when we're in the air---by the way, where should we go?"

"Anywhere you think is safe, Pete. Your guess is as good as mine." Chen broke the connection, turned to Officer Wolczk. "Shiella, get me

a hopper outside and a STAT squad to go in it, and get it five minutes ago."

"Yes, sir." The watch officer turned and rushed off to carry out the orders.

"You too are a target, Constable," Secarius reminded him.

"What else is new?" Chen shrugged. "Would you like to come along?"

"It's my purpose in life," Secarius grinned toothily. "This time around, at any rate."

\* \* \*

"Hold here until Jason arrives," Pete instructed Miguel Corto, the security detail's senior officer, yelling over the loud hum of the hopper's engine a few meters behind him. "I don't think there'll be much trouble from the cultists, but Jase seemed to believe that the CSF would show up eventually."

"We'll be okay, Pete," Miguel said, jerking a thumb back at the heavy Gatling laser platform behind them. "We got 'em outgunned."

Pete's gaze travelled past the weapons emplacements, past the looming Gothic bulwark of the hospital behind them and into the mass of chanting cultists that ringed the perimeter. Their white robes seemed to shift amorphously in the flickering torchlight with a spectral quality that sent a shiver up his back...or maybe it was just the rain.

"Just keep your eyes open," Pete warned. "And be careful." He clapped the man on the shoulder, then turned and headed up the ramp of the hopper, taking a seat next to Rachel. "Damn," he breathed

as he fastened his safety harness. "I feel like a coward leaving them like this."

"Me, too," Rachel said, watching the crewman close the hatch. "I mean, they're all here for me, and now I'm leaving them..."

The hopper rose slowly, the pitch of the hum from the fans rising steadily as they climbed. Pete was trying to stretch around and get a look back at the hospital when the harsh wail of a proximity alarm from the cockpit brought him up short.

"Shuttles!" The pilot barely had time to call out before something smashed into the rear of the hopper with a scream of ripping metal and plastic.

"Steering fans are gone," Pete heard one of the crewmen shouting as the aircraft began to shake, then was forced to cling to the handholds on the armrests of his seat as they went into a steep dive.

Rachel clutched at Pete's arm, sure that they were going to plunge headfirst into the ground at two hundred klicks an hour, but the hopper's pilot managed to level it off bare meters above the ground. The hopper bellied in at fifty klicks an hour at the apex of a steep hill, shattering the lift fans with a painful shriek, and sending the aircraft into an immediate roll down the slope.

Pete and Rachel were thrown helplessly against their restraints as the hopper went end for end, tumbling a full forty meters before it came to rest on its roof at the base of the hill. Suspended upside down from his harness, Pete shook himself to clear the fog which had descended over his eyes and his brain. The passenger compartment was filled with fumes from the ruined turbines and resonant with the



moaning of tortured metal and plastic, and he could barely see by the smoke-filtered glow of the emergency ghostlights.

Twisting around in his harness, he saw Rachel hanging limply beside him, dazed but breathing steadily, and felt a bit of relief. Now, if he could just get out of the damned harness...

He began to work at the catch, but a grinding sound from the hopper's main hatch brought his head up sharply. Someone was trying to force the door. A rush of panic going through him, Pete clawed for his holstered sidearm, but the holster was tangled in the harness and jammed against the armrest of his seat.

He was still wrestling futilely with the harness and his gunbelt when the hatch was ripped out of its track and peeled back like a strip of bark. Pete's ears rung with the awful sound of tearing duralloy, and he wondered through his panic what fearsome creature could manage such a feat. Then he saw it...a huge, bulky, faceless monster made of dark metal, one arm terminating in a wicked claw and the other fitted with a concave dish. The dish-hand pushed through the opening and suddenly a vibration coursed through Pete's body, shaking his teeth and numbing his brain. He fought to stay conscious, finally recognizing the "monster" as a man in a suit of powered combat armor and the dish as a sonic stun weapon. He gritted his teeth against the agonizing resonance, making one last desperate grab at his gun, but a blanket of darkness swallowed him and the last thought he had was that he had failed Jason ...and failed his brother.

The sonic accelerator cut off, and the arm withdrew with a whine of servos, the trooper wearing the powered armor suit turning to the

man striding up behind him.

"That ought to put everyone in the hopper out, sir." The voice was tinny as it made its way through the suit's external address speakers.

"Are you sure the one you want's on board?"

"That's her," the tall man confirmed, sticking his head through the open hatchway and aiming a finger at Rachel's unconscious form.

"Bring her."

\* \* \*

"Sweet Jesus," Jason breathed, staring in disbelief at what remained of Mt. Carmel.

What had been the oldest hospital on Canaan was now a huge funeral pyre, a blazing conflagration feeding on the stone, wood and buildfoam wreckage. Here and there, emergency crews were treating the few survivors, but everywhere were the charred and twisted bodies of the dead. Not just the dead of his Constabulary but those of the cultists as well. Some of the cultists had obviously been shot by the lasers of the constabulary guards, but scores of them had been blown apart by the same heavy beam weapons which had destroyed the hospital.

Jason struggled to keep his balance, his head spinning from the pungent scent of burning flesh. He tried not to look at the bodies, but his gaze was drawn to his left. A head lay next to the stump, cauterized at the neck by whatever blast had vaporized its body, its gem-blue eyes staring up at him, mouth frozen permanently in a curiously satisfied smile.

*I guess Fourcade finally gets to meet his Predecessors,* Jason mused.

"It was assault shuttles," Amy Lee, the only surviving member of the security detail, told him with a hint of a sob in her voice. The medic treating the burns on her shoulder gave her hand a comforting squeeze, nearly in tears himself. "They looked like Corporate merc ships...they just came in with no warning..." Her voice broke again. "The cultists attacked just after Mrs. Mitchell's hopper took off, just running into our guns and dying, like they didn't even care...we killed dozens of them. But they were just to distract us, so we wouldn't see the shuttles. They hit the security force first." She glanced at the burning ruin that had been one of the laser platforms. "Then they just kept firing at the hospital. They didn't stop...they just kept hitting it and hitting it..." Finally, she broke down and began crying uncontrollably.

Jason wanted to hug her, tell her it would be all right, but he couldn't---he didn't have the strength. All he could think was that he had been responsible for these people's safety.

"There was nothing you could have done," Secarius told him. The monster-man, incongruously enough, had been almost unnoticed in the carnage, standing quietly behind him. "They were after you and Mrs. Mitchell, and they will do anything to see you dead."

"At least Pete and Rachel were out of here," Jason shook his head.

"Inspector Chen!" Jason turned, saw one of the emergency crew running his way. "Inspector Chen!" The man skidded to a halt, breathing hard. "They've found a wrecked hopper at the base of a hill about five clicks from here...Pete Mitchell's down there..."

Without a word, Jason began running for his aircar, Secarius close

behind.

\* \* \*

"They hit us with a sonic," the hopper's pilot told Jason, leaning against the side of the twisted aircraft. Chen was kneeling over the prone form of Pete Mitchell, watching the medics go over his body with scanners, searching for broken bones or internal injuries. "The only reason I didn't black out was my flight helmet," the man held up the polymer and ceramic piece of headgear, scratched and chipped from the impact of the crash. "It's partially shielded."

"What did you see?" Jason asked him, his voice hoarse and raspy. "Who was it?"

"I couldn't see them," the man shook his head. "The viewscreens are buried in the dirt. But I heard them talking. They took Mrs. Mitchell---they were looking for her specifically. One of them mentioned something about a surprise for her husband."

"He must be hurting them badly," Secarius surmised. "They mean to use her as insurance against him."

"What can we do about it?" Jason snapped at the thing which had once been Cutter. "We can't just sit around here and wait for them to take us out."

"We have to find Mitchell. He has to know."

"How the hell are we going to find him?" Jason shook his head. "He could be anywhere."

"Get me a ship," Secarius told him, his voice cool and reasoning, his powerful tail twitching like a cat that has sighted its prey. "I may know where to look."

Jason turned away from him, disturbed at the inhuman calm the creature displayed, and found himself staring into the apocalyptic column of dark smoke rising off the ruins into an even blacker sky. In the hottest fires of war, he'd not seen one man die. He'd spent those ugly years behind an antiseptic computer terminal, analyzing data, and he had never seen the twisted, bloody face of battle except through the psychological filter of a virtual reality feed.

Until now.

Here's your war, a mocking voice whispered in his ear. And welcome to it.

## Chapter Five

I was dreaming about the war when McIntire woke me. I hadn't dreamed about it in a long time, and I thought about having my headcomp wake me up when it started, but my curiosity got the better of me.

It was black and the brush was wet with the steady rain falling. I could feel the coarse surface of the leaves beneath my left hand and the hard, tungsten curves of my plasma assault gun under my right. Beyond the thick bush where I hid were the lights of what had been the Commonwealth StarFleet Orbital Defense Control Center---what was now the planetary headquarters for the Tahni occupation force on Canaan.

Tahni shock troops in their black powered armor patrolled the outside of the heavily-fortified building, supplementing the automatic sensors and traps that lined the perimeter. Unfortunately for them, I'd already disarmed those handy devices---fairly easy, since they'd all been StarFleet issue. Now all that was left was to take out the guards, and get me access to an input terminal long enough to inject the virus which would link the defense satellites---still intact and being used by the Tahni---to the targeting computers in the Terran battlefleet that would arrive in less than an hour. We hoped.

If we did everything right, we could wipe out the whole Tahni fleet in one shot.

"B-Team's ready," Pete whispered to me, relaying a transmission

from the headset he wore. He was so young, not even eighteen yet; he looked out of place in the scrounged Tahni body armor, a Gauss battle rifle at his side.

"Right," I said. "Give them the signal---thirty seconds."

This would have been a lot easier with some heavy weapons, but I hadn't had room on the stealthship for anything but a few rifles, so we'd do it the hard way. I readied myself, gathering my legs beneath me, and I could hear the dozen others with me doing the same. Rachel wasn't among them---she was in the B-team with my older brother, Isaac. We'd just rediscovered our feelings for each other, and I didn't trust myself to have her with me.

Pulling on my gauntlets, I briefly considered donning the face hood that completed my combat suit, but decided against it. This fight was personal, and I'd go into it not as the faceless demon of an Omega Group commando, but as Cal Mitchell, a man fighting for his home. My headcomp had counted down to fifteen seconds by the time I began to draw a bead on the sentries, raising the heavy plasma gun to hip level. Mine was the weapon with the most obvious signature, so I was elected to trigger the attack.

As the last few seconds crept by, I thought of my parents, and I wished I'd been able to see them, to talk to them one last time before they'd been lost to me forever. Then the count hit zero and I fired.

Inside the ceramic cartridge that was the weapon's ammunition, a ring-shaped array of superconducting capacitors fed a burst of energy to the rifle's integral laser, stabbing into the lump of metallic hydrogen at the center of the array. The laser heated the hydrogen to

a plasma state, which was contained for a blink of an eye by a powerful electromagnetic field also energized by the liberated charge from the capacitors, and used the plasma to refocus itself and continue out of the muzzle, ionizing a narrow corridor of air from the barrel to the target.

The gun bucked in my hands as it spewed a ball of ionized hydrogen at relativistic velocities along the path burned through the atmosphere by the pilot laser. The dazzling flare of plasma impacted the rightmost of the Tahni guards, exploding against his chest armor with a thunderous roar of liberated water vapor, disintegrating a section of armored torso big enough to stick my head through. I jacked another round from the magazine with the gun's pump action, a mist of the liquid nitrogen that had flooded the cartridge from its burnaway cooling jacket hissing from the chamber as the spent ceramic shell flew out of it.

Before I could get off my second round, the others had opened up with their Gauss rifles and appropriated Tahni lasers, cutting most of the remaining shock troops down in a hail of hypervelocity tungsten slugs and pulses of coherent light. One of the Tahni troopers managed to get off a wild burst from his armor-mounted electron beamer, the artificial lightning crackling into the trees, before I blew off the top twelve centimeters of his torso with another plasma round.

Then we were rushing the main entrance, while Isaac and his squad hit the rear, the shouts and unmistakable sounds of firing weapons reaching our ears even as we took up covering positions around the duralloy double-doors of the main entrance. I hung back



while Pete and Tom McGrey burst through the doors---I wanted to be the first one in, but I was the only one who could penetrate the control systems.

The pair of technicians at their stations spun around, surprise evident on their eerily human faces, and one clutched futilely at the pistol strapped to his chest. Pete and Tom pumped both of them with tungsten slugs before either could rise from their seats, then fanned out to cover the rest of the room.

"Clear," Pete called, bringing the rest of us rushing in.

I pulled one of the techs from his seat, noticing how, up close, their broad noses, pancake ears, and ridged brows belied their superficial resemblance to humans. The Tahni's blood was just as red as ours, though, and it stained the chair from the gaping wound in his chest. I ignored it, fell into the seat, leaned my plasma gun against the console, and used my neurolink to tie into the computer net.

The Tahni had added their own safety measures to augment the ones StarFleet had left in place, but I had little trouble penetrating them---my internal A.I. had a lot of practice at this. Then it was just a matter of injecting the virus programmed into my headcomp and making sure it got past the system's safeguards.

"Cal." Pete shook my shoulder, breaking my link with the net. I looked up at him curiously. "We've got a counterattack coming in from the garrison---at least fifty shock troops in powered armor. They've already overrun Carlotta's listening post, and they're gonna' be on this building in less than a minute."

"The virus is in." I shrugged, standing from the station and

retrieving my assault gun. I looked around at the people guarding the doors, the people who had been my friends and neighbors. They were the same people who had ostracized me for joining the military, and for having Jason Chen, an Offworlder, as my friend. Now, Jason was risking his career and I was risking my life to save them. "Let's get out there," I said quietly.

The battle was already raging by the time we reached its front lines. The one advantage we had was that the Tahni couldn't afford to destroy the control center---they needed those defense satellites to maintain their hold on the planet. That meant they wouldn't be using air support or heavy weapons, but God knew their shock troops were bad enough. I only hoped they didn't have any Imperial Guard cyborgs. I still had nightmares about those things.

Sizzling, crackling electron beams stabbed out of the night all around us as we fell into positions around the building, the crackle of their beamers intermixed with the sharp hum-snaps of the rebels' Gauss rifles and the hissing whine of their lasers. Brush burst into flames and dirt exploded in great chunks as the multikilojoule bursts of charged particles touched it, but our men and women steadily pumped round after round into the night without flinching.

Those among us firing the lasers went quickly. The Tahni backtracked the laserbursts on infrared and focused their fire on the sources. A half a dozen people I had known since my childhood took electron beam hits and blew apart in bloody explosions of flash-boiled bodily fluids. Deciding to forgo my high-signature plasma gun for the time being, I drew my Gauss pistol and started pumping carefully-

aimed rounds into the mass of oncoming shocktroops.

The Tahni had been called out hastily and with little organization, and their advance showed it. They were massed in the open with no overwatch formation or suppressive fire, and it took a heavy toll on them as my neighbors, most of whom had been hunters all their lives, picked them off one by one. The shocktroopers' battle armor was a good defense against beam weapons, but the high-caliber Gauss rifles I'd brought in spat out tungsten slugs at more than 3,000 meters per second, passing through even the troopers' duralloy breastplates like they weren't there.

The worst part about it was that we wouldn't even know when the fleet arrived. We could hold for days, dying in place, and it would all be for nothing if Jason hadn't been able to convince the brass to go through with the plan. But there was nothing else to do. We had nowhere to run to anymore.

The electron fire from the shocktroopers seemed to taper off and they gradually began to withdraw, leaving a score of their number lying on the open field. Hearing a handful of whooping cheers come from the perimeter, I squashed a desire to yell out that it was too early to celebrate. They'd find out soon enough, I figured.

It didn't take more than about thirty seconds before we felt the ground begin to shake beneath us. I didn't even need to see it to know what it was. It came quickly into view, towering a good ten meters over us as it came over the rise, a bulkily humanoid shape wrapped in thick armor and bristling with weapons.

I had faced Tahni mecha once before, and the only thing that had

saved my ass was the timely arrival of my spaceship. Since my ship was in three pieces on the opposite side of the planet, that didn't seem too likely. What seemed very likely was that we were all about to die.

Yeah...all of this would be for nothing. My parents and my sister were dead, me and Rachel and my brothers were about to die, and it was all for nothing. I had come here and given these people hope---told them that if they stuck together we could win. I'd even had to fight my older brother for the right to lead. Now I was going to get all of them killed, and it would be all for nothing.

Like hell. With a yell that came from somewhere around my testicles, I jumped up from my position, grabbing my plasma gun. If we were all going to hell, I was going to lead the way.

In the seconds between the time I sprang from cover and the time I closed the distance to the machine, I let my battlecomp run all the possible attack patterns against a Tahni strike mech. Besides telling me I was fucking nuts, the computer let me know that the only weakness the big machine had was a maintenance hatch between the legs that led all the way up to the cockpit. Not being stupid, the Tahni engineers had given it full armor plating, but if you aimed in just the right spot, you could spring the catch and open the door.

Typical Tahni thinking---building big and brutal, but not considering the more intricate details. Still, as the hits from the mech's proton cannons blew up several square meters of dirt around me, it was easy to appreciate big and brutal. A blast impacted only a couple of meters away and threw me forward head over heels, jolting my gun free of my hands and filling my vision with stars.

I shook my head clear just in time to see the spiked underside of a rounded footpad coming straight down at me. I rolled clear and felt the ground shake as it crashed down only about a half a meter from me. Springing to my feet, I scooped up the fallen plasma gun, and ran between the mech's pillar-like legs.

Scanning the thick, duralloy plating that covered the articulated leg joints, I spotted the lines of the maintenance hatch and raised the muzzle of my assault gun. It was a bit tricky trying to keep the weapon steady while dodging those huge feet, but I finally got one clear shot.

No matter how big a guy is, I thought to myself as my finger tightened on the trigger, you give him a shot to the 'nads and he's going down...

The gun bucked against my shoulder and a starbright ball of plasma shot out of it, splashing over the machine's groin. The metal blackened, several layers of it burning away, but there was no noticeable effect on the mech---until the maintenance hatch fell open, its catches incinerated.

I dropped the plasma gun and jumped for all I was worth, barely catching hold of the edge of the opening with my fingertips. I hung there for a moment, my feet dangling a couple meters off the ground, then pulled myself up onto the first rung of the access ladder. I didn't pause for breath, just scrambled up the ladder, past the forest of superconducting power trunks leading from the machine's reactor. Above me, I saw, was the rounded hatch that separated me from the pilot's compartment, an ejectable pod not actually built into the rest of

the machine.

Unlike the outer hatch, this portal wasn't locked---it was only secured by a hand-cranked lever. I drew my Gauss pistol, braced myself against one wall with a leg, and reached up to undog the hatch.

The heavy portal fell open with a bang that was much too loud, and I was suddenly standing between the legs of the Tahni mechjock, his "easy chair" situated just behind the hatch opening. He looked down at me, his face hidden behind the visor of his neural interface helmet, and began clawing frantically at the pistol holstered across his chest.

I emptied the magazine of my sidearm through the opening, the heavy slugs punching into the mechjock's groin and tunneling upward to blow his brains out through the top of his helmet. The cockpit was suddenly splattered with blood, the Tahni's body going limp against his harness, and I could feel the whole mech begin to lurch forward.

I had time to think *a shot to the nads*...before the machine totally lost its bearings and crashed nose-first into the dirt. I was thrown through the hatch into the cockpit, slamming my shoulder into the bulkhead. The crash shook me like a human maraca, and I felt for a moment like I'd broken every bone in my body, but my headcomp told me that I was basically undamaged.

Slowly, gingerly, I pulled myself up from where I was pressed against the bulkhead, retrieving and holstering my sidearm. This, I told myself, was it. If the damn Tahni had anything else to throw at me, I was going to sit down and cry.

It was a bit easier to crawl out of the access tunnel horizontally than it had been to climb it vertically, and I quickly emerged into the night to the sound of uncontrollable cheering. I felt a bit like taking a bow, until I looked around and realized the rejoicing wasn't for my little act of heroics---it was for the light grey Commonwealth Marine landers descending on pillars of fire, their proton cannons stabbing out into the Tahni shock troops with claps of thunder.

"Holy shit," I breathed, just staring at the landers. All I could think was how close we had cut it; the Fleet ships had to have been converting from Transition Space before we even hit the control center. A few minutes the other way and...

"Cal!" I heard Isaac's voice behind me, turned and saw him running up to me, arms outspread, a huge smile splitting his face. In that one, drawn-out moment, I could see so much of Dad in his wide, honest face, his handlebar mustache and square jaw.

Then, suddenly, the joy in his eyes turned to horror, and I saw the warning coming to his lips. I started to turn, but he threw a body block into me, knocking me off my feet backwards. As I fell, I could see the slugs impacting across Isaac's chest, penetrating the tactical vest that was all the armor I'd been able to persuade him to wear. He jerked, dancing backward as the bullets tracked upward, one finally taking off the left side of his skull in a spray of red.

There was a scream welling up inside me, but my headcomp realized the danger behind me and forced me into action. I somersaulted forward, scooping up Isaac's Gauss rifle, and tumbled into a crouch, facing the direction from which the barrage of gunfire

had come. Standing there, struggling to reload his rifle, was a Tahni tech officer, dressed in their characteristic light armor and dress cap. I pumped a half-dozen rounds into him, throwing him backwards, his head disintegrating from the hail of tungsten slugs.

I reflexively scanned the area for other threats, but found none. Dropping the rifle, I turned back to where Isaac lay face-down, stumbling blindly over to him, my eyes veiled over with tears. I fell to my knees beside him and started to turn him over, but stopped myself---I knew I shouldn't. I wouldn't like what I saw. I felt my breath tighten in my throat, and had to let it out in a scream. I screamed as long as my breath held out, wailing an inhuman howl that echoed through the night.

When the breath was gone, it was as if all the emotion was gone out of me as well, as if I had become a statue, staring down at the body of my older brother. It was several more seconds before I felt a gentle hand settle on my shoulder, and saw Rachel's face appear before my eyes.

"Are you all right, Cal?" she asked me softly. I looked up at her, but there was something wrong with her...her face was covered with blood, and her right arm was blown off above the elbow, the sick white of the bone sticking out obscenely.

I tried to say something, but my mouth worked soundlessly, too horrified to speak. Rachel looked at me in concern, as if she didn't realize she was wounded.

"Are you all right?" she repeated. "Are you all right..." The face seemed to blur, transform into a slimmer, darker one, yet one that



shared the look of concern.

"Are you all right, Constable?" Kara McIntire asked me, floating over my cot. I looked around, saw I was in the little cabin in the *Hecate* once more, and let out a deep sigh.

"Yeah," I croaked hoarsely, working at undoing the sleep restraints. "What's wrong?"

"The capacitors are charged," she informed me. "But there's at least a dozen ships out there, and they're running active scans."

"I'm coming." My headcomp told me I'd gotten a little over two hours of sleep, which was about ten less than I'd needed.

I made my way up to the cockpit, lit up with the viewscreen projection of the steep-walled impact crater in which our little ship was nestled. The sensor readouts were having a nervous breakdown, warning us that they were picking up massive microwave, laser and neutrino scans, but I ignored them, strapping into the pilot's seat.

"Do you think they'll pick us up?" McIntire asked me, taking a place in the right chair.

"Not likely," I said. "This asteroid's got a lot of radioactives--- should screen us off pretty well."

"How the hell did you find this place?" McIntire stared at the screen.

"When I transitioned insystem during the war," I explained, "I needed a hole to crawl into in case they spotted my warp corona. Jason and I researched the Corporate survey of the system's outer asteroid cluster, found a rock with an impact crater deep enough to put me out of sight, and a uranium content hot enough to keep me off

their scans. Just lucky no one's mined it out in the last ten years."

"How long before we can get out of here?" She rapped the control panel impatiently.

I shrugged. "I'd give it another hour before they give up on us."

"And if they don't give up?"

"Well, we could make a run for it, now that the capacitors are charged. It'd only take us about a half hour to make minimum safe distance at maximum warp. Of course, the Patrol cutters would catch us long before that, with their bigger reactors. And with our capacitors charged full, the warp field wouldn't have any place to discharge if we took a hit, so we'd burst like a balloon." I smiled at her genially. "So I guess we'd better hope they give up."

"Goddamnit," she breathed.

"Relax," I told her. "We're in a lot better shape now than when we were stuck in the middle of that station."

"I've had enough hiding," she exclaimed with surprising ferocity, turning on me with fire in her eyes. "I don't give a damn if they kill me, but I've had my bellyful of hiding."

"Must be rough, being on the run," I said. "Most people couldn't handle it...but then, most people didn't use to be DSI Cadre."

Her head snapped around, and she shot me a look that had my hand inching toward my pistol...but then she seemed to relax, letting her breath out in a quiet sigh.

"I guess I should ask how you know," she said softly.

"You beat me to the draw back on the shuttle," I explained. "Now, I know there's a lot of jackheads out there with wired reflexes, and I

know I got mine ten years ago, but I'm still equipped with what is essentially the cutting edge of augmentation. That's why I'm still alive after almost six years of dealing with the Skingangers.

"My big advantage over the street-surgery types," I went on, "is my headcomp. All my nerve-wires are linked to it, and it's still superior to anything on the open market---shit, half of it's still classified. There's no way you could have been faster than me, unless you had a headcomp on a level with mine, and there's only two places you could have gotten one.

"I know," I said with a lopsided smile, "that you weren't with *Omega* group, and that only leaves one other possibility---the Department of Security and Intelligence. Back in the war, they had operatives that got our kind of wetware. But it was the implant laser that clinched it. Only one kind of DSI personnel got that kind of implantation...the Cadre. The deep cover agents that got sent to occupied worlds to organize resistance movements. We weren't supposed to know about you, but when you're involved in the kind of shit we were, you hear things." I cocked my head curiously. "I always wondered why they didn't have a few of you on Canaan."

"They tried." She surprised me with her candor. "Their ship was destroyed *en route*. That's why they didn't send the Glory Boys in--- you were too valuable."

My jaw must have dropped to my ankles when she used the term Glory Boys. As far as I knew, there were only about a dozen people alive that knew that name, Colonel Murdock's unofficial nickname for the dozen of us. It had been his idea of a joke, considering we were

the most highly-classified unit in human history.

"It wasn't Cutter's idea to ask you for help, Constable," she informed me. "It was mine. I...stumbled upon your existence during the war. I was on Loki during the Tahni occupation, and during a resistance raid, we were unexpectedly helped by a pair of commandos in some kind of high-tech combat suits. They disappeared afterward, but I asked a few questions when I got back. Once I knew you existed, it wasn't that difficult to dig up more information. Just out of curiosity, of course," she smirked.

"After the war, I stayed in...they gave me a cover as a Corporate mineral scout." She must have noticed the look of surprise on my face, because she nodded. "That's right---I'm still with the Department. Or I was until this all began, at any rate."

"Go on," was all I trusted myself to say to that little tidbit of information.

"I was supposed to be spying on Corporate Council operations...we suspected them of attempting to manipulate and bribe planetary governments and Commonwealth officials."

"Oh there's a news flash," I muttered.

"I just knew what they told me. My partner wasn't involved---he was just a greedy little gnat I'd picked up as a cover. The Department has several operatives in place in the Corporate Council---or they did. Now, I suspect it's probably the other way around."

"You mean the Council has control of the DSI?" I gaped at her, not believing what I was hearing.

"All I know," she went on, "is that, when I reported the attempt on

my life to our man in the Council Security Force, they came after me with fucking assault shuttles. After that, I didn't trust anyone. I went to Cutter because he was an old friend from my days in the Cadre, and learned about you later on, but I don't trust anyone else. For all I know, they could have their hooks in the Patrol, too. I'm not sure I could trust Fleet Intell, even if I could get anyone there to believe me."

"If you're telling me the truth," I said, thinking furiously, "then there's something you need to know. I ran a memory dump on Fourcade's headcomp back at the station, and I found out something--- something I didn't tell you before because I wasn't sure if I could trust you." I sucked in a deep breath, looking her in the eye. "The Corporate Council is funding, organizing and directing the Predecessor Cults."

"Gaia's tits," she hissed, eyes widening. "Why?"

"I'm not sure I could tell you why, but I did find out how. They've convinced the Cultists that they're in contact with the Ancients, and that they've come back to warn us of some sort of impending doom."

"How did they manage to convinced them of that?" she wanted to know.

"Easy---they let the Predecessors do the talking for them."

"What the hell are you saying?" She stared at me like I was insane.

"Our friend, Kevin Fourcade," I explained, "was introduced to living Predecessors. Invited to run bioscans to prove they weren't robots or cyborgs. Whatever they were, they were living non-humans, not of any race discovered so far in the Cluster."

"What..." her eyes seemed to be on something light-years away.

"What did they look like?"

"Tall," I shrugged. "Deep-chested, with digitigrade legs and three-fingered hands. Dusky skin, with dark striations. Big, liquid eyes, high foreheads and some kind of spiky mane of what almost looked like feathers. Why?"

"On the Predecessor site I was sent to," she told me, voice almost trembling, "there were several bodies, suspended in some kind of stasis. The techs seemed to believe they were Predecessor corpses."

"And what did they look like?" I asked her, a cold fog blowing over my soul.

"You just described them," she replied, confirming my worst fears.

"Aw, fuck." I rubbed my eyes tiredly. "Things just get better and better."

"Do you think they've actually contacted the Predecessors?" she asked quietly, almost as if she was afraid to say it.

"I don't know what to think," I sighed. "Hell, I'm *afraid* to think, Captain McIntire."

"Kara," she corrected me, in a tone so soft and matter-of-fact that I looked up to make sure it was really her.

"Okay...Kara," I felt like my mouth was uncomfortable with the word. "I'm Cal."

"Nice to meet you, Cal," she smiled, offering me a hand. I laughed quietly, realizing just how outlandish this all was.

"The pleasure's mine, Kara," I took the hand. "The pleasure's all mine."

I let Kara grab a nap while I took the watch, and she was still asleep by the time the sensors told me that the Patrol ships had moved on. I gave it another half hour to make sure they weren't being tricky, then kicked us away from the rock on maneuvering thrusters. The jolts must have woken Kara, because shortly I saw her floating up from the cabin, still a bit groggy.

"We under way?" she asked me, pulling herself into the acceleration couch.

"Uh-huh. Just about to hit the impellers."

"Do we have a course laid in?"

"Ever heard of a place called Thunderhead?" I wondered.

"Thunderhead..." she repeated slowly, before comprehension lit up her eyes. "But...that's in the heart of the Pirate Worlds."

"What better place for a couple of wanted criminals in a stolen starship?" I grinned. A quick check of the instruments told me we were far enough away from the rock to activate the impellers, and I gently began feeding the warp units steady jolts of energy. The impeller effect boosted us away from the asteroid cluster, out into interplanetary space. "Besides," I went on, "there's someone there who can help us."

"Help us?" Kara frowned disbelievingly. "From what I've heard, there's not man, woman or child on any of the Pirate Worlds that wouldn't slit your throat for the nano in your blood."

"No doubt," I agreed, setting the ship on a course that would take us to our designated jump point in a bit less than an hour. "But it always helps to have friends."

It had only taken me a couple days in T-space to remember why I hated star travel. It may sound romantic to someone who's only been to orbit, or never been off their own planet, but it really amounts to spending days or weeks sitting around in a cramped tin can, breathing reprocessed air, drinking reprocessed water and eating really bad food.

I glanced down at the piece of cardboard masquerading as a pita sandwich, lying half-eaten on the command console. I'd spent the first twenty hours in T-space sleeping, and the last ten eating---my body needs a *lot* of food to repair and restock itself after a combat high. I'd been hungry enough to make even the processed soy products the courier's autochef spat out seem appetizing---for a while.

Now, my hunger was slowly subsiding, the microscopic nanotechnological machines in my blood busily rebuilding me from the inside out from the raw material I'd given them. Most people get the normal nano injections at birth nowadays, even on a backwater like Canaan, to maintain their systems against blood clots, viral infections and cancerous growths, but I had a deluxe setup thanks to Colonel Murdock's technicians.

My nano could rebuild broken-down tissue, allowing me to heal minor injuries in a couple hours, and was designed to break down all liquid and solid wastes to provide energy for my augments. One side-effect of this was that I got really hungry after using my implants. Another, and one that had taken a little longer to get used to, was that I could go for several days without going to the bathroom. Came in



handy during long ViRdramas.

Tossing the sandwich down with a sigh of disgust, I stared at the deactivated viewscreen. There was nothing to see in T-space; it was just as incomprehensible to our limited senses as it was to any known instrument. Even the theoretical types who'd designed the Transition drive didn't know exactly what it was, only that it existed and we could use it. In that sense, hyperdimensional physics resembled religion.

"Jeez, are you *still* eating?" I heard Kara's voice behind me, swivelled in my acceleration couch. She'd been sleeping for at least ten hours, probably for the same reasons I had, and looked a bit disheveled.

"Just finished." I waved at the remains of the pita sandwich. "Want the rest?"

"I ate while you were asleep. My bodily requirements seem to come in an opposite order from yours." She moved around to lean against the console, facing me. "You were making a lot of noise in your sleep."

"Always happens." I turned away from her, uncomfortable with the subject. Most of the dreams had involved Rachel---I kept waking up with images of her as she had been in the automed.

"You must really love her," Kara said softly, as though she hadn't listened to my answer.

Looking her in the eye, I was surprised at what I saw there. It was a wistful, almost envious look, one that seemed totally alien on her hard professional face.

"Tell me about her," she said in almost a pleading tone.

"Rachel's like my conscience," I mused, eyes watching a scene from twenty years ago. "I start to lose hope, give up on my job or my world, and she's always there at my shoulder, convincing me to keep fighting the good fight. She believes that I can do anything, and I guess she makes me believe it, too."

"She'll be all right," Kara put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "We got her to help in time."

"I know," I said. "Intellectually, I know. But the last time I saw her, she was lying in an automed with her arm blown off, and that's the sight that's going to stick in my head until I see her again." I snorted, shaking my head. "If I ever see her again. I just wish..." I trailed off, embarrassed.

"What?" Kara prompted.

"Well, it's just that...you see, Rachel lost a daughter during the Occupation," I explained. "That was over ten years ago, but she still has trouble with the idea of having any more children. We've talked about it, and she promises to think about it, but the timing was always bad." I shrugged. "I always pictured us having a family someday, but now... Now I don't even know if we'll ever see each other again."

"I'm sure she believes you'll come back."

I leaned back heavily in my chair. "Rachel once said to me that even though my job got pretty dangerous sometimes, she never worried about me making it home as long as I promised her I'd come back. She said she always trusted me to keep my promises because when I left Canaan to go into the Academy, I swore to her I'd be

back---and even though it took me nearly seven years, I came back."

McIntire laughed softly. "I could never see myself getting married. I always thought I'd go nuts stuck with the same man for that long. How long is your contract? Ten years?"

"Till death do us part," I told her, a snapshot of our wedding flashing across my memory.

"A Lifetime Contract?" Kara's eyebrow rose. "God, you don't see many of those anymore."

I shrugged. "You do on Canaan. At least you did till a few years ago."

"Is it...exclusive?" I glanced up quickly, saw the look she was giving me, and felt a tingle go through my stomach. I suddenly noticed the brief shorts she was wearing---normal on-ship garb, but they nicely exposed her long, tanned legs.

"Yeah," I said, trying to keep it from sounding like a regret.

"And you've never..." She leaned closer to me, face just inches away from mine.

"No." I shook my head. "Never."

"Why not?" There was a playful note in her voice, and I felt both a sudden urge to run and the helpless realization that this was a very small starship. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

Her eyes seemed to swallow me up as she drew closer, and I felt the soft touch of her lips on mine. I took her by the arms and gently pushed her away, acutely aware of the erection pressing against the inside of my pants.

"Because I made a promise," I said with what I hoped was a tone of

finality.

I let loose of her and fell heavily into the seat, wondering if I'd set the artificial gravity too high---there was this weight I could feel across my chest that made it a little hard to breath.

"Damn," Kara said softly, staring into space. She seemed genuinely shocked.

"Sorry," I attempted. "It's not that..."

"Oh, I understand." Kara shook her head, a small, bemused smile slowly spreading across her face. "Goodness, Constable, you're certainly a throwback, aren't you?"

"That's me all over, Captain McIntire." I laughed at the irony of it. "A high-tech throwback."

We stared at each other in embarrassed silence that she finally broke by fooling with the ship's databank, bringing up a holo of Thunderhead.

"Have you ever been there?" she asked me.

"Never had the pleasure. The only reason I know anything of it at all is that I got a message about two years ago---a holodisc delivered by a tramp freighter captain. It was from Deke Conner, my partner in the Boys. He wanted to let me know that he was still kicking, and that if I ever needed a place to hole up, he had come into a little business out in the Pirate Worlds." I frowned. "Odd, that he thought I might run into that kind of trouble, isn't it?"

"Not that odd, if you've ever been to the Pirate Worlds," Kara muttered. "Paranoia is a way of life there. They see everything the Commonwealth does as a plot against their way of life."

"Well, we're not ones to cast aspersions on anyone else's conspiracy theories," I pointed out.

"*Touche*," the Captain replied a bit ruefully. "At any rate, I've been to Thunderhead, and the main reason the Cabals managed to hang onto it is that no one else wanted it. It's a big, heavy world with a lot of iron ore and a huge moon. In a few million years, the moon will probably slow down its rotation rate, but it's still young enough to have a seventeen hour day." She rubbed the back of her right hand, a habit I assume she'd picked up while trying to get used to the laser implanted there years ago.

"The spin, and the high iron content give the planet one hell of a magnetic field, and the moon causes some of the most unstable weather patterns you've ever seen on a habitable world---hence the name. There's also a shitload of volcanic and tectonic activity, and the magnetic field winds up causing various cancers in at least a third of the population."

"Cancer?" I arched an eyebrow. "Good Lord."

She nodded knowingly. "Yeah. Only the wealthy and powerful can afford nano injections on the Pirate Worlds. The average age of death there is eighty, if you can believe that."

"Christ," I hissed. "Why the hell would anyone live there?"

"Most of the people don't have a choice. Those with the luxury of being able to leave are too hot to go anywhere in the Commonwealth, and those that aren't usually have accumulated enough money and power to compensate for the environment." She eyed me curiously. "Where does your friend fit into those categories?"

"There's one thing you'll learn real quick about Deke." I smiled, remembering a cocky grin, a swaggering walk. "He doesn't fit too well in anybody's categories."

## Interlude: Damiani

Zero-gravity ballet was, Andre Damiani finally decided, overrated. It had taken him several years of dutifully attending dozens of performances to come to this conclusion, and he deeply regretted the lost time, but it had finally dawned on him here, at the McAuliffe Station performance of "Swan Lake."

With virtual reality chips cheap and readily available, actually attending a performance in person had become a pastime of the idle rich or fanatical enthusiasts; but Andre felt that to fully appreciate an art, you needed to see it performed live, warts and all. So there he was, in his private luxury box at the outer wall of the performance hub, watching, with a sudden feeling of *ennui*, the dancers weave their intricate web of movement in the freedom of null-grav.

Enough. If there was anything the empty, cheerless life of his father had taught him, it was the stupidity of wasted time. Slipping into the complimentary magnetic overshoes, he unstrapped from his couch and headed out the door. The corridor without was empty but for the menacing bulk of Trint, his Tahni bodyguard, who had waited dutifully for him during the concert.

"Leaving already, Mr. Damiani?" The tall humanoid asked in unaccented Basic.

Andre smiled wanly. "I'm afraid my fascination with this particular art form has run its course. If we hurry, however, we can be back at my Pacific Rim villa in time for the Cyberball championships."

"Yes, sir." Trint followed him down the corridor to the lift station, eyes and augment sensors carefully scanning for any potential threat.

Trint, Damiani mused, had been quite a find. He had to credit his Security Chief for that one. As a Tahni, the bodyguard was visually intimidating enough, but what really counted wasn't visible to the naked eye.

And wasn't that always the case? Damiani chuckled to himself.

The lift took them quickly back to the docking bay, where Andre's personal shuttle was mated to one of the umbilicals that bristled like spines off of the transport tube. Tourists clanked up and down the corridor's metal plates, looking strangely comical as they walked jerkily, their legs raising too high with each step, looks of half-panic on their faces. Andre was much more practiced with the magnetic shoes, and walked almost normally, while Trint looked as if he'd been born in zero-gravity.

Which, Andre thought, was quite a joke, considering that, in the strictest sense of it, the Tahni bodyguard had never been born at all.

The Council Director keyed the palm pad, stepped through the lock into the shuttle...and pulled up short. Lounging carelessly in the passenger cabin, hanging half-out of a restraint web, was a tall, rangy male with a shit-eating grin on his all-too-familiar face.

"Evening, Mr. Damiani." He threw the Director a casual salute with one hand, the other stroking the end of his bushy brown mustache.

"Dramatic as ever, I see." Andre moved on inside, Trint following him.



"Hard habit to break," the man said. "Hey there, Trint," he added, nodding to the Tahni. "Long time."

"Never quite long enough," the bodyguard returned softly, regarding the human with a look so cold it could freeze mercury.

"Close the lock, Trint," Damiani ordered, not taking his eyes off the other man. "If my Chief of Security has gone to all the trouble of tracking me down and sneaking aboard my shuttle, I can only assume it means that he has something vital to discuss with me. At least," his tone went hard, "he had better."

The tall man grinned. "Well, it does help to keep in practice." He glanced casually over to make certain Trint had secured the lock before continuing. "We've got some major shit hitting the fan, sir."

"It's not that damned High Priest again?" Andre sighed heavily. "I swear to God, if that man drags his feet another day, I'll slice off his testicles..."

"Nothing so minor, I'm afraid," the Security Chief replied. "You remember the scout pilot...the one who discovered the site?"

"Don't tell me your hired guns haven't gotten to her yet?" Damiani raised an eyebrow. "If you can't deal with one burnt-out scout jock..."

"She's a little more resourceful than we'd anticipated," the tall man said wryly. "She's DSI."

"*What?*" Damiani exclaimed. "You mean to tell me that all this time, you didn't know..."

"The DSI, as you damn well know," his Security Chief growled, "has more employees than any of your corporations, and half of them are undercover. I could hardly be expected to have a working knowledge

of every lookout and mole they have on the frontier."

"Funny," Andre shot back, "since that's precisely what I pay you for. At any rate, it's taken care of simply enough. Call Gregorian. Have him bring her in...she should damn well trust her own Director, eh?"

"Gregorian hasn't been totally honest with us. The conniving bastard's known who she was since the beginning, but he didn't want to admit he was spying on a Council operation. He's already tried to kill her once---she won't trust him again." The man frowned, bit his lip hesitantly. "But that's not the worst of it."

"This begins to remind me of a bad joke," Andre muttered. "Do go on."

"She looked up an old friend from the Department---a freelancer who had gone Cyborg, become a street surgeon on a backwater colony on the frontier. We...I had the local cultists go after her, try to make it look like a religious raid on Skintown. You know how the Pred's feel about the Skinners. But something went wrong, and the local cops stumbled into it, busted up the cult compound."

Damiani's eyes narrowed, and the tall man could see something dangerous behind them.

"Do tell me, my old friend," he enunciated, "that they didn't find anything."

"We sent in the local CSF Investigator and the Patrol officer in her pocket to salvage things. But the Planetary Constable...we think he may have penetrated the priest's headcomp. My Investigator sent in a team to take him and the girl out, but they got fragged, and---well,

we're not sure exactly how, but the Constable and the girl got onto the Council station. They stole a courier and blasted out on impellers." The Security Chief sighed, rubbed his chin. "The impeller pulse trashed the docking bay, and a couple of ore freighters went up and blew the whole Goddamned thing straight out of orbit. By now...hell, they could be anywhere in the damned Cluster."

"You're telling me that one backwoods *cop* did all of this?" Damiani was incredulous.

"Not just a cop," the tall man said, voice grim. "His name is Caleb Mitchell. During the War, he was part of a top-secret commando unit called *Omega Group*." Unnoticed by either of the humans, Trint's eyes narrowed, and the bristly Mohawk mane stood up straight at the crown of his head.

"Gaia," Andre breathed, visibly effected by what the other man had said. His eyes took on a faraway look for a moment, then focused on the Security Chief. "You've got to track them down. You personally, no more surrogates. You above all should know exactly where he'll go, and who he'll look for." The Director pulled himself closer to the tall man, piercing him with a hard glare. "If he tells anyone what he knows, I'll hold you personally responsible for the destruction of everything my father and I spent the last century trying to bring about. And don't think that what you are will save you, my friend. Progress is a wonderful thing---they're building more efficient assassins every day. Or so," he said, smiling coldly, "I'm told."

"Don't waste threats, Andre," the tall man shook his head. "I've already got a line on this---we have his wife, and that gives us some

leverage. Besides, if I fail to kill him, you can bet your sweet ass that he won't fail to kill me. Progress aside, he's still one of the seven most deadly human beings that ever lived." His laugh was sharp and humorless. "Or so I'm told."

## Chapter Six

When I was just a kid, I'd viewed a remastered ViRdrama of an old horror story from sometime in the Twentieth Century, called *Dracula*; and the image of Transylvania---a land of tall, forbidding mountains and ominous forks of lightning crackling out of a perpetually storm-swept sky---had made quite an impression on my young psyche. Standing in the middle of the main street on the largest city on Thunderhead, I was so struck by the resemblance the place had to that mythical home of the lord of the undead that I half-wondered if they'd filmed the whole thing right here.

Built in a narrow river valley, Freeport was surrounded by some of the tallest, most diabolical-looking mountains I'd ever laid eyes on, their jagged peaks swallowed in a roil of dark, cumulonimbus clouds. Fierce forks of eye-searing lightning connected the clouds to each other and to the towering mounds of ebony rock, reminiscent of an orbital space battle as seen from the ground.

The wind from the approaching storms lashed through the open streets between the simple, one-story buildings, howling like a lost soul, tugging vigorously at the loose sleeves of my jacket and whipping through my hair. It slapped me in the face with particles of loose mud from the fusion-formed street and a few foreshadowing raindrops, as if seeking to rouse me from my thoughts and bring my mind back to the business at hand.

I glanced at Kara McIntire, walking purposefully beside me, eyes vigilant for trouble, hand never straying too far from the pulse pistol

at her side. Oddly enough, she seemed more at ease here than she had on the ship. I guess this was her element, and she felt more in control.

Despite the weather, the streets were crowded with people, just as the crude spaceport had been jammed with ships---everything from tramp freighters to highly-modified orbital shuttles to what had to be a pirated Patrol cutter. It had been an interesting landing, with no ground control, no customs to clear, and no port security to speak of. We had, instead, paid quite a hefty sum to a gang of well-organized hoods to guard our ship. A rough bunch, but Kara assured me we could trust them. Apparently, a good reputation was worth almost as much as a big gun out here.

I tried to blend in with the mass of humanity milling around us, but we both looked too *healthy*. It seemed as if every face we met was hollow and sunken, the pallor that was symptomatic of living on the constantly overcast world only adding to the effect. Even those who seemed well-dressed enough to be fairly well off, even those who were visibly armed and obviously dangerous had this diseased look about them. A shudder ran through me as I thought again of Dracula's domain. These people all seemed to be the walking dead. Maybe Canaan wasn't so bad after all.

I expected beggars, just from the look of the town, but I saw none. Oh, there were street peddlers aplenty, hawking their wares in muted monotones, and from any point on the boulevard I could pick out at least a half dozen prostitutes. From the almost omnipresent weapons among those who could afford them, I also assumed that there was an

abundance of petty thieves---but no beggars. Maybe the atmosphere here wasn't conducive to generosity.

I was so absorbed with watching the people that I almost missed the subtle transition from the more business-like section of Freeport to the much larger entertainment district. The low, practical buildings gradually gave way to taller and more garishly decorated structures, the glare of advertising holos lighting up the streets, accompanied by the clashing strains of a dozen different styles of music, loudness the only common factor.

It wasn't too much longer before we could see it: the biggest, loudest and brightest of all the bars and casinos on the strip, topped by a brightly colored holographic sign that announced we were approaching the *Lucky Bastard* hotel, bar and casino.

"I'll say this for Deke," I muttered to Kara as we came up to its vaulted main entrance, "his tastes haven't changed much since the war."

We stepped inside and were instantaneously immersed in an ocean of visual and aural stimulation that threatened to overload our senses. Lights from flashing holos seemed to come from everywhere, assaulting us with visions of the gambling, drinks and various erotic services available to us in the establishment. A throbbing, highly sexual beat of a style of music at least ten years old pulsed out of the walls, trying to take control of our heartbeats and raise our level of unconscious excitement.

Here there was more of a mix of locals and offworlders, I saw from the healthier complexions scattered through the pack of customers.

This was the hangout for those who were only here on business, auctioning their illegal shipments of weapons, drugs or black market ViR, or arranging for the movement of pirated cargoes. There were probably at least two or three DSI and Patrol spies among the crowd as well, from what Kara had told me. Hopefully, they wouldn't know about us yet.

The *Bastard* was a pretty big place by colonial standards, a sprawling, three-story building with a first level devoted entirely to a huge dance floor, with a well-stocked bar at its center. Gaudily clothed merchants and rough looking smugglers danced with prostitutes---male and female---to the outdated music, often having to step over the unconscious forms of those who had imbibed a bit too much. We wormed our way through the undulating patrons, along the way counting about ten different dances being performed to the same music.

I'd already tried to contact Deke over his neurolink, but the electromagnetic interference was so strong that microwave commo was nearly impossible. We'd have to do this the old-fashioned way.

We ambled slowly to the bar, taking it all in. Nobody'd asked us to check our guns, which meant almost everyone would be armed, some of them possibly with implant weapons. Even the most jovial-looking merchant could have a bionic weapons mount for a small dartshooter or a single-shot laser, though I didn't expect to see anything on the level of Kara's multi-shot, rechargeable weapon. It made for a host of possible threats and too damned many targets.

"Beer," Kara ordered from the bartender---yes, they actually had a



*live* bartender, anachronistic as that might seem. He was a tall, balding fellow who was obviously native to a world with much lower gravity.

I sat down at the bar. "Gimme' a Margarita."

The long drink of water brought us our glasses, and I handed him about twice the price of our drinks in Tradenotes. Longdrink's eyes opened wide.

"Lookin' for a friend of ours," I told him, sipping my drink. "About a meter-eight, brown hair, mustache and sideburns. Gambler named Deke Conner."

"Gambler, eh?" The bartender arch an eyebrow. "Well, I think I might've heard of him. Upstairs," he told me. "Second floor poker game."

"Thanks." I saluted him with my glass, taking one more swallow before setting it down half-finished. Kara downed what was left of her beer in one gulp, slammed it down on the bar and followed me up the stairs, brushing past a group of foul-smelling locals cursing their luck.

On the second floor was a gambler's paradise. They had everything---blackjack, Tracer, Mono...but no poker to be seen. Then Kara nudged me, nodding to a doorway on the far side of the room. We moved over to it, and I pulled it open, stepping inside...and found myself looking directly into the not-insignificant bore of a large Gauss pistol.

It took me a moment to change the focus of my vision from the end of the gun to the face of its owner. It wasn't a pleasant face---it was hard and blocked, with a broad nose, deep-set dark eyes, short-cut

black hair and a perpetual frown.

"Hi," I said, grinning weakly. A glance to my right showed that Kara had also walked into the barrel of a handgun---a compact pulse pistol held by a particularly attractive female prostitute, her flaming red hair treated to sparkle with the light, as if it were ablaze with some supernatural fire.

"Well, if it isn't Cal Mitchell," I heard a very familiar voice say, and had to look past the goon in front of me to identify its source.

He was all crooked grin and swept back hair and style; trim and fashionable in a black jacket and jumpsuit covered with holos of sinuous green dragons crawling up his arms and legs. Even the handcrafted leather gunbelt at his waist looked fashionable. Deke always wore his sidearm low on his left hip to facilitate a fastdraw. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"God *damn*, it's good to see you, Slick," I said.

"Don't be so sure, Caleb, m'lad." Deke brushed by the big fellow to confront me nose to nose. "After all, you still owe me twenty bucks."

Then, with a laugh, he swept me into a hug, pounding me on the back.

"It's been a long time, Deke," I told him. "You're looking pretty good." And he was---just as young and cocksure as the first time I'd seen him, except his mustache was a bit bushier, and his sideburns a bit thicker.

"You don't look so bad yourself, bud." He slapped me on the shoulder, then looked past me to Kara. "But Jeez, Rachel sure has changed a lot."

"Uh, Deke, this is..." I let my words trail off as I glanced a bit apprehensively at the others gathered around the poker table. Beside the goon and the prostitute, there were three others---a rough-edged male with the look of a freighter jock, an impeccably-dressed woman who I guessed was a merchant, and weasely little man in drab grey clothes. "This is a friend. We...we got some trouble. We need to talk."

"Sure thing," he said, a cool curiosity in his eyes. "This game's a wash anyway. Let's go to my room." He turned to the goon and the prostitute, their weapons reholstered and out of sight. "Thanks for the backup."

"Call me later, Slick," the hooker said, pressing up against him. "If you need anything."

"You can count on it, hon," Deke said. "I'll see you later." He kissed her, giving her butt a squeeze before we headed out the door.

We followed him upstairs to the hotel portion of the *Bastard*, which seemed to be mostly a working area for the hookers. No tell-tale moaning, though---I supposed the rooms were soundproofed. Deke led us up a short set of stairs at the corner of the building to an efficiency apartment, locking the door behind us.

He picked a bottle off the kitchen table and began pouring drinks. "So, Cal, you still trying to be a farmer?"

"And Constable," I added, accepting a glass from him.

"Rising up in the world, eh?" He laughed, handing Kara a glass, which she accepted with a nod. Pouring himself a drink, he fell into a chair in the corner of the room, taking a long sip. "Well now," he said,

"I hate to sound like a bad host, and it's not like I'm not happy as hell to see you, old buddy, but," he went on, staring directly at Kara, "who the hell are you, and," he finished, looking back to me, "what the fuck's going on?"

"My name is Kara McIntire," she said in answer to the first question, and I saw Deke's eyes widen in instant recognition.

"Holy shit," Deke muttered, rising from his chair, moving around as if to get a better look at her. "I guess I should feel honored in the presence of the most notorious outlaw in the whole Cluster."

Kara smiled, taking a gulp of her drink. "Mother always did want me to be famous."

I sighed, slumping onto the couch. "So, the story's already made its way out here, huh?"

"Story?" Deke looked at me like I'd committed blasphemy. "Gaia's tits and bloated ass, Cal, there's a bounty on her head of over a million in Corporate scrip!"

"Fuck," I breathed. *That* was some serious money, especially to a Pirate Worlder who dealt in tradenotes---a mil in scrip was at least twenty-five times that in tradebills. You could buy a fleet of ships for that kind of cash.

"Oh, God." Deke laughed a bit wickedly, shaking his head, staring at McIntire. "God, You are a sadistic bastard." He turned to me, wagging a finger. "Do you know, my old friend, just how long I have waited for the big score? How many of these piss-ass poker games I've tried to turn into a deal, to turn into another deal, to turn into *the* deal that would finally get me the kind of network I needed to have real

power out here? And now, in walks a living, breathing, extremely good-looking pile of money that could set me up as the biggest wheeler-dealer out here, and right beside her is my best friend, saying he's asking me for help."

He laughed again, tossing back his drink. "Well, hell," he sighed in a quietly reflective voice. "A value system can be a terrible thing." He leaned against the table, reached back for the bottle and refilled his glass. "I've heard the official line from the Commonwealth Newsnet...why don't you tell me what *really* happened?"

"It's a long story," I warned him. "And getting longer all the time." I looked around the room, suddenly suspicious. "Are you certain there's no way we can be overheard?"

"Hey, it's hard enough to communicate with anyone here when you *want* to. The only thing that could pick us up is a laser bouncing off the window, and I've got detectors set up for that." He grinned. "Never know when the Patrol or DSI might be interested in one of my shipments."

"Yeah." I smiled, glancing at Kara. "You never know when one of those pesky DSI types'll turn up."

"So," Deke prompted, gesturing with his drink, "spit it out."

"Before I do," I said with a bit of hesitation, "you've got to know that what I'm about to tell you could get you killed---just *talking* to us could be enough to get you killed. I know it's been a long time since the war, and I don't want to assume anything. If you want us to haul ass out of here, we'll do it right now."

"Shit, Cal," he clucked. "Friends are hard to come by in my

business, and a lot harder to trust. In the years since I last saw you, I think I've met three other people I felt like I could trust my life to. You and me---we saved each other's ass so many times, I've lost count. You need a ship or some information, I'll get it for you, no questions asked. But if you need an extra gun, someone to watch your back, I'm here."

"Thanks, Deke." I took a deep breath. Much as I hated to drag him into it, I felt a profound sense of relief that he had agreed to help. With as much upheaval as my personal world had experienced in the last few days, it was nice to know that some things didn't change.

Without further preamble, I launched into a brief narration of the events of the past few days, highlighting the information I had learned from Fourcade. I could see Deke's eyes grow wide as I described the Corporate Council's role in the operation of the Predecessor Cult; and when I had finished with the details of our escape from the Council station, he whistled softly in appreciation.

"Well, you never were one to do things by half, Cal," he commented. Chuckling softly, he shook his head. "You know, Thunderhead is the biggest asylum of clinical paranoids in the whole damn Cluster, but this beats the wildest conspiracy theories I've ever heard poured out over a table full of dead soldiers." His face clouded over, the smile disappearing. "If it were anyone else, I'd laugh them right off this planet; but since it's you, I guess I should be very worried."

"Aren't you a bit of a paranoid yourself, Mr. Conner," Kara asked him curiously, "considering you chose to live out here?"

"I'd prefer to be thought of as a free spirit, *agent* McIntire," Deke replied with more than a touch of sarcasm in his tone. "Life's a bit too structured for my liking in the Commonwealth. I guess," he sighed, "I should have expected this kind of move from the Corporates, considering their track record since the war. But I'll be damned if I can figure out what they're trying to accomplish with this alien bullshit."

"That's what we've got to figure out, though," I said. "We can't stay on the run indefinitely, and we can't go to the military without a better idea of what's going on."

"So what do you need from me?" he wanted to know.

"First thing, we need another ship," I told him. "A description of the courier we stole is probably circulating right along with the bounty notice on Kara. I've already sanitized the ship's ID, but I'd rather not take the chance. After that, we need to try to contact someone official and make them believe our story."

"That could be harder than it sounds," he reflected, one hand playing with the end of his mustache. "Have you thought about what you're going to do if you can't convince anyone in the government of what's going on?"

"I've tried not to." I ran a hand through my hair, sighing. "I guess we wouldn't have any choice but..."

I was interrupted by the door bursting open and the huge goon who'd held a pistol to my head downstairs stamping inside. Both Kara and I had our guns half out of their holsters before we saw Deke raising a restraining hand.

"It's okay," Deke assured us, turned to the man. "What's wrong, Kane?"

"We got assault shuttles landing at the port," the big man announced---I would say he looked grim, but his face seemed to constantly look grim, so I couldn't be sure. "Corporate mercs are sealing off the town," he said, eyes fixed on us. "They're looking for somebody."

"Son of a bitch!" Kara sprang to her feet.

"How could they have found us so fast?" I wondered.

"Maybe they weren't just looking for us." She peered at Deke, and I wondered what exactly she had in mind.

"Well, hell," Deke snapped, "maybe they were looking for a cheap drunk and a quick lay! Who the fuck cares?" he pulled open a closet door, grabbing a pair of tote bags and tossing one to me---he'd been ready to run. "We've got to haul ass."

"They'll have the port sealed off," I warned him, slinging the bag over my shoulder by its strap.

"We'll take my ship," he told me, pulling his Gauss machine pistol. "It's not at the main port---but we'll need some transportation..."

Before he could finish the thought, a chorus of screams and shouts erupted from the floors below, interspersed by loud crashes and the crack-whine of discharging pulse weapons. All of our heads whipped around, and my sidearm jumped into my hand.

Kane pulled a Gauss pistol, yanked open the door and thrust himself out of it weapon-first.

"Clear for now," he reported, twisting back toward us. "Let's go."



He was starting to turn back when a barrage of laserfire came up the stairs, slicing through the big man and spraying his burning blood and tissue out across the room, splattering all three of us. Slumping forward without a sound, he fell down the stairs, and I threw myself into the doorway on my belly, pistol extended.

At the foot of the stairs were a pair of corporate mercs, dressed in the same soft armor and visored helmets as the thugs that had attacked my house, and toting heavy pulse carbines. I pumped both of them with a pair of tungsten slugs apiece, slamming them against the wall.

I was getting my feet underneath me to head down the stairs when another merc came around the corner, hosing the stairwell with laserfire. Crimson threads struck the walls all around me, spraying me with burning plastic, and I jerked back into the room, landing on my back and kicking the door closed with my foot. I scrambled away from the door as pulses of coherent light chopped through it, impacting on the far wall.

"The window!" Kara yelled, pulling me to my feet.

I nodded, brought up my Gauss pistol and pumped a couple rounds into the tough transplas to weaken it. Deke joined me with his electromag machine pistol, spraying the pane with tantalum needles. The transplas shattered under the combined impact, and Kara threw herself out of the opening, pistol in her hand. Deke followed her, and I paused for a moment to pop a fresh clip into my slugshooter, wincing as the laserfire continued to slice through the door. My weapon reloaded, I sprinted across the room and jumped through the

shattered pane into the night.

A cold rain whipped at my face as I sailed downward head-first from the third story, flipped end-for-end in midair and landed with my feet about ten centimeters deep in the mud in the alley behind the *Lucky Bastard*. And found myself right in the middle of another damned firefight.

Parked across the front of the alley was a Ground-Effects-Vehicle armored personnel carrier, mounting a heavy Gatling laser in its turret, waiting for anyone to try to escape through the alley. The rotary-barrel pulse weapon opened up just seconds after I hit the ground, barely giving the three of us time to press back against the walls before the swath of incandescent threads tore through the alley.

Steaming mud showered us as the support laser blew apart the dirt street, hunting for us in our positions in nooks in the wall. The laser pulses tracked upward, chipping off pieces of buildfoam wall, sending burning debris flying off into the dirt and adding to the cascade of steam that was rising up to obscure their view.

Gritting my teeth, I brought my pistol up to chest level, calling up a mental picture of a turret-mounted Gatling laser and searching it for weaknesses. My databank reminded me that it was possible to disable the gun with a well-placed shot to the feed mechanism where it entered the chamber, and I constructed a computer overlay that floated across my vision. When the overlay passed across the actual weapon, there would be a bright red glow over the point I should target.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed off from the wall, firing as I fell

backwards to the muddy ground. I had only a fraction of a second to target the red glow, but I managed to fire a two-round burst in that bare moment and saw the tungsten slugs impact the side of the Gatling laser. The rounds pierced through the feed mechanism, setting off the explosive lasing cartridges within it, causing the rest of the ammo in the feed train to cook off. The turret sent up a shower of sparks and black smoke, sitting there streaming flames for a few seconds like a giant roman candle before the whole gun blew off its mount on a column of fire.

The flaming Gatling laser went up nearly ten meters into the air before it finally arced downwards and impacted in the mud only a few meters in front of me, a hail of red-hot metal and plastic spattering around it. The APC's side door flew open and three armored mercs piled out, nearly trampling each other in their effort to evacuate the vehicle.

Deke and Kara took them out with carefully-targeted bursts of laserfire and tantalum needles, throwing one of them back into the vehicle, the other two slumping in front of the APC's open hatch. I got to my feet and checked in both directions to see if there was any more immediate threats.

"Where to now?" I turned to Deke once I saw things were clear. He stared at me as if I was speaking a foreign language, his face ashen. He'd been acting on pure instinct and programming so far, but Kane's death was just hitting him. "Deke!" I grabbed his arm, shaking him. "Which way do we go?"

His eyes hardened, and I saw an anger behind them that I'd never

seen in six years of war. He pulled away from my grasp, looking around, trying to get his bearings.

"Follow me," he mumbled, heading off down the alley away from the burning APC.

Kara and I jogged after him, the echoes of screams and gunfire fading as we drew farther away from the *Lucky Bastard*. Deke led us through a twisted maze of alleyways and backstreets, always just one step and one street away from the patrolling mercenaries. Now and then we heard the distant sounds of shouting or scattered shots, but most of the town was dead quiet, its wary residents gone to ground at the familiar scent of the hunter.

We ran almost a kilometer, clear out of the entertainment district to the residential area on the other side of the strip---a dank, Spartan landscape of wind-battered rowhouses. I was about to ask Deke just where we were actually going when he pulled up to an abrupt halt at the end of an alley directly across from a small, one story garage.

"What're we looking at?" I asked him quietly.

"Private garage," he told me, eyes carefully scanning the streets.

"We're gonna' need a ride to get to my ship."

"Looks clear," Kara opined, checking both ways, then starting to move out of the alley.

"Looks are usually deceiving." Deke grabbed her arm. "There's a groundcar behind the building---just pulled up. Check thermal."

I switched my vision to thermal imaging and saw the heat trail in the dirt leading from the street to the alley behind the garage. I heard Kara swear softly as we both went back to normal optics.

"So what's the plan?" I asked Deke.

"Well," he began, pulling out a small control device from a pouch on his belt, "the atmosphere may screw up microwave commo, but," he continued, aiming the unit at the front of the garage and pushing a button inset on the face, "you can still do wonders with laser line-of-sight."

The largest of the three doors that took up most of the front of the garage began to rise slowly open, but before it could make it all the way up, a large Ground-Effects-Vehicle shot out with a cloud of dust, its plenum inflating even as its fans kicked it forward. Barely clearing the rising door, the flat-black, lozenge-shaped vehicle spun into a tight turn out of the building, skidded sidelong with a whine of turbines, and wound up parked crossways across our alley, its side hatch falling open directly in front of us.

Scrambling up the steps that lined the inside of the hatch, Kara and I fell into the roomy passenger compartment, while Deke jumped into the driver's seat, thumbing the control to close the door.

"Man the gun," Deke snapped from the driver compartment, then hit the accelerator, giving the car a shot of power and sending us screaming down the street on a cushion of air.

Looking around the cab, I saw in an instant the ass-end of a medium Gatling laser latched down in the rear of the vehicle. Fighting against the bucking of the car, I lunged back to the gun mount, scanning its controls until I found the touch pad that opened up the cowl and uncovered the weapon's business end.

The hinged cowl unfolded like an insect's wings, revealing the

multibarrelled pulsegun and automatically activating the sights.

Through the targeting screen, I could see one of the mercenary APC's pulling out from behind the garage, the corporate thugs alerted by the sound of the groundcar. I powered up the ammo feed, sighted on the juncture of the vehicle's weapon turret, and squeezed the twin triggers.

The weapon belched out a burst of thirty rounds, an almost-solid crimson thread connecting our two vehicles for a fraction of a second. I'd been trying for their ammo supply, but the bouncing of the car threw off my aim and the burst only spalled armor off the face of the turret with a light show of sparks. The merc gunner answered with a long, hosing volley that swept from wide right of our car to wide left, ripping a jagged line of impact craters across the sloping back and making me instinctively flinch from the dazzling shower of vaporized metal.

I could see the surrounding buildings blurring by us in my peripheral vision, but I concentrated on my aimpoint, trying to ride the wave of curves and jounces until I could keep a good sight picture. The center of the pursuing APC's mass passed briefly through my sights, and I hosed off a long burst, trying to move the gun with the motion of the car and ride my target. This time I was luckier, and I could see a few rounds tear through the cowling over the APC's port air intake, send up an incandescent jet of hot gasses from the turbine.

"Nice shot!" Kara complimented me, watching the screen over my shoulder.

I only grunted by way of reply. Losing a turbine would slow them

down, but it wouldn't help too much in these narrow streets. Unless we got to some wide-open spaces, we wouldn't be able to outrun them.

I was hunting for another shot when their gun opened up again, chopping through the armor around our own weapon's mount. I threw myself to the floor, landing on top of Kara as the passenger cabin was suddenly filled with the acrid stench of hot gas and the whine of ricocheting bits of spalled metal.

"Goddamn!" Deke swore from up in the driver compartment. "Hold on back there!"

I don't know exactly what he did then, as I was busy trying to get myself untangled from Captain McIntire, but all of a sudden the car was spinning wildly to the right, pushing both of us against the left wall with enough centrifugal force to do an orbital station proud. I had almost managed to pull my face out of Kara's armpit when the car whipped back to the left, fishtailing wildly and sending us tumbling around the cab anew.

"Jesus, Kara," I wheezed as her shoulder blade jabbed me in the ribs. "Next time put your fucking seatbelt on."

"Well pardon the hell out of me," she grunted, arms flailing.

Finally, the car straightened out, jumping forward with a whine of overtaxed turbines, and I was able to pull myself back up to the gun mount. A cold wind was whistling through the holes blown in the cab by the enemy's last blast, sending a chill running through me as I took my position. We had left the city behind us, I saw as I looked at the targeting screen, and were cruising at a very high rate of speed over

the surface of the river that ran past Freeport.

Seeing the jagged, irregular rocks that jutted at intervals above the surface of the rough-running river, I whispered a silent prayer for Deke's driving ability and gripped the side of the weapons mount. At least it looked like we had lost the APC.

"Incoming at two o'clock!" Deke announced. "Attack pods!"

"Oh, great," I moaned. I twisted around to look through the front viewscreen, saw two of the bulbous aircraft coming in at about a klick.

"They're just space-dropped hoppers, right?" Kara took up her kibbutz behind my right shoulder. "They can't be carrying much armor---your Gatling can knock them down."

"Yeah," I conceded sourly, "if I can hit them."

I tracked upward with the gun, my aim not helped by the constant swerving Deke was putting the car through to avoid the rocks. One of the pods swooped down in a steep dive and I could see the grenade launcher mounted in its chin spit out a short burst. Deke jukeed the car sharply to the right only moments before the water exploded only meters to our left in a triple-thunderclap that shook our vehicle.

I sent a volley into the night sky, but came nowhere near the attack pod as it feathered its portside maneuvering fan and dropped off to its right. I tried to track it downwards, but then the other pod came in along the same attack pattern and targeted us with a burst of grenades. This guy wasn't as accurate as his wingman, and all three detonations impacted harmlessly on the rocks a good twenty meters behind us.



He juked away, but I ignored him, searching instead for the first pod and finding it in its return arc for another pass on us. I cut across his path with a long burst of laserfire, starting to keep a close watch on my ammo count---I still had more than two thousand rounds left, but that could go pretty fast. I saw a flash of sparks off the edge of his fan skirt, and he immediately started an evasion pattern, not seriously damaged.

"Shit," I muttered.

"How's it going back there, bud?" I heard Deke call from the driver's seat.

"Not good, Slick," I admitted. "I'm running low on ammo and these guys are too maneuverable. How much longer we gonna' hang our asses out in the open like this?"

"Not too much farther," he assured me. "Just keep them off our backs for another three minutes."

"Easy for you to say," I replied through gritted teeth, firing off another burst.

This was not my field of expertise. I was a commando by training, and human targets didn't move quite this fast. It would have been nice to have an A.I. targeting system to track and nail these fuckers automatically, but you didn't often find that kind of hardware in a groundcar. So I was stuck with my own biological and cybernetic software and reactions, which, though superior to some fighter control systems, weren't designed for this kind of work.

Still, I smiled grimly to myself, I was state-of-the-art. I picked up the second pod as it set up for another attack run, not yet trying to

evade, got him right in the center of the crosshairs and squeezed the triggers. The Gatling laser consumed over eight hundred hyperexplosive chemical cartridges in just under five seconds, and the solid crimson line intersected the pod nose-on. The bulbous aircraft's MHD turbine erupted in an incandescent cloud, scattering glowing debris from the pod like a man-made meteor shower, and sending the main body tumbling into the river with a billow of steam.

"State-of-the-art, motherfuckers," I hissed.

"Fancy shooting, farmboy!" Deke whooped.

"How are you on ammo?" Kara asked me.

"Little over a K," I told her, shaking my head. "Not enough to track the other one---he's good."

"Don't worry about it, bud," Deke told me. "Look up front."

I twisted around, looked through the front viewscreen and saw the river---and us---heading into the side of a mountain. I wondered why that was good news, until I took a closer look and saw that the river actually went into a wide cavern cut through the center of the mountain. I grinned, realizing what he'd meant. The cave was wide enough for the hopper to follow us, but if it did, it'd be a sitting duck.

The pod pilot must have realized it, too, because he cut loose with a barrage of grenades, putting a wall of fire between us and the cavern entrance. The blasts rocked the car and I could hear fragments of shrapnel ricocheting off our sides as the multiple thunderclaps echoed back and forth between the river banks. Deke went into a series of sharp, choppy maneuvers that threw me back and forth, from one wall to another, trying to keep from getting nailed before we could reach

the entrance.

I snapped a brief volley at the pod to keep him honest, but had to leave it at that, since I'd need almost every round to take my shot if he followed us. The pod juked away from the pulses, but came right back on our tail, latching like a bulldog. I cursed softly, risked another look up at the cavern. I'd barely turned around when the rock mouth swallowed us up, cutting off the light from the huge moon and plunging us into darkness.

The car's headlights illuminated the rocky outcroppings ahead, but the only light in the rear of the vehicle came from the targeting screen. It was set to IR imaging, lighting up the passenger compartment with a pale, green glow, and showing me that the remaining attack pod had given up the pursuit.

"He broke off," I called up to Deke. "He'll probably be waiting for us at the other end of this tunnel."

"With friends," Kara chimed in.

"Don't worry about the other end." The light, trickster tone had returned to Deke's voice. "We're taking a detour."

I didn't have time to ask what he meant, because he chose that moment to throttle back the car, bring us to a hover near the left-hand rock wall. The left-side hatch swung open with a whine of servos, coming down to touch the wall---just below the entrance to a narrow tunnel carved in the rock.

"Everybody out!" Deke scrambled out of the driver's compartment, hefting one of his tote bags. "Last stop."

"Where does it lead?" Kara asked, unstrapping from her seat and

grabbing the other bag.

"To an abandoned landing field left over from the Pirate Wars," he told her, jumping over from the hatch to the tunnel. "It's about three clicks on foot."

While I listened to them, I was working on freeing the Gatling laser from its moorings. I hit the quick-releases and pulled the gun from its mount, leaving the tracking servos, targeting mechanism and trigger yokes behind. A stream of linked rounds spilled out of the feed link, then settled back into the ammo box with the bulk of the remaining cartridges. I yanked the box out of its niche, hung it from the side of the Gatling by the appropriate attachments, then hefted the gun by its rear auxiliary trigger frame and front pintle. A bit unwieldy, but I could handle it.

"Yo, Supersoldier," Deke called to me from the tunnel. "You coming?"

"On my way," I assured him, ducking through the hatch and springing over to the mouth of the tunnel. Deke and Kara both looked me up and down, the corner of Slick's mouth turning up in amusement at the sight of the support weapon I held.

He shook his head in obvious amusement. "You always did go for the big guns." Turning to Kara, he confided, "I think it's a phallic thing. Male insecurity, eh?"

"When everyone's out to get you," I said, grinning, "being paranoid's just good sense."

Deke chuckled softly, remembering the first time I'd said that to him, back in the Academy.

"All right." He drew his pistol. "Let's get going before they figure out where we are."

The tunnel was dark, narrow and twisting, and the footwork a bit precarious, but we finally made our way out of the mountain, emerging more than a half an hour later into a small clearing---and an annoyingly steady rain. I did a quick scan of the cloud-filled sky and the dense woods around us as I stepped out of the tunnel, but saw no sign of the mercs. If we were lucky, they wouldn't figure out what had happened until we were offplanet.

The trek through the woods went quickly and wordlessly, Deke leading us down the barely-existent path as though he walked it every day. The dense foliage finally opened up and we stepped cautiously into a landscape of tall grass, interrupted by scattered stands of trees. The moon was partially clouded over, but it provided enough light to make me feel pretty vulnerable, combining with the cold rain running down my back to give me a partially-psychological chill.

We jogged quickly across the open patches of ground, heading steadily uphill until we reached the edge of a large plateau, ringed with tall, spongy trees that bent like reeds in the planet's strong windstorms. Stepping through the line of trees, we found ourselves standing not ten meters away from the angular, metal mass of a starship. Partially concealed by a huge camouflage net that stretched from one side of the clearing to the other, the basic lifting-body shape of the craft was still obvious.

Not too large for a starship, it looked like a converted military tactical missile carrier from early in the war. The StarFleet had still

been trying to figure out how to take advantage of the Transition drive, and the tac-missile carriers were the first attempt to get away from the capital-ship mentality. They didn't last too long after the war, since most of them weren't retrofittable for the new, more efficient and powerful reactors and weapons, and most were stripped of armaments and sold on the open market to try to recoup the massive war debt. This one still had its camouflage coloring---green and brown on top, grey-blue on the underside---and seemed in pretty good shape for a surplus job. Scrawled across its left hull in bright red letters, in sharp contrast to the camouflage, was the unofficial name: *Dutchman*. I wasn't sure if Deke had named her, or if the designation was a holdover from some anonymous pilot.

Deke pushed a button on his laser signaling unit, and a broad ramp lowered slowly from the ship's belly with a hiss of hydraulics, a light from inside the craft spilling out to create a shadow play on the ground in front of it.

I squinted at the bulky craft curiously. "So, you always keep your ride hidden in the mountains, or are we just on the edge of a used starship sales lot?"

"One thing you learn real quick anywhere in the Pirate Worlds," Deke replied, striding quickly up the ramp, "is, if you have anything you want to keep for long, you damn well better keep it hidden."

"I take it all back, Captain Conner," Kara said, following him up into the ship's equipment bay, "I'm *glad* you're paranoid."

Deke hit a control on the bulkhead, and the ramp began to raise almost before I stepped off it, while he continued on out of the bay,

heading, I guessed, for the cockpit. I stashed the Gatling laser in an open equipment locker and followed Deke and Kara up the corridor, even as I heard the turbines of the ship's atmospheric takeoff jets whine to life.

In the cockpit, I fell into the navigator's seat behind Deke and Kara's station, facing portside. Strapping in, I felt the *Dutchman* begin to rise from the ground, ripping the camo nets apart with a roar of the belly jets. I could see the trees falling away from the front viewscreen, our jets stripping off a cascade of leaves from the tall growths as we rose above the clearing, and I wondered how long we would have before the mercs' ships spotted us.

"Look," Deke called from the pilot's seat, as if reading my thoughts, "I'm going to have my hands full trying to fly us out of here. Kara," he said, poking a finger at her, "I'm assuming you can run the tactical board and long-range sensors."

"I can handle anything you've got," she replied, finding the copilot's 'face hookup and plugging it into her socket.

"I believe that, darlin'," Deke laughed, sounding more and more like the man I'd known during the war. "Cal," he said, twisting around to look me in the eye, "I've got the forward guns, but I'm going to need you to take the upper turret mount---and while you're at it, tell this bucket of bolts where we're going."

"No problem." I chewed my lip as I set the navigation board to accept my neurolink frequency, hardly feeling the *Dutchman* surge forward as Deke vectored the thrusters for horizontal flight.

I plunged into the ship's computer system, splitting my

consciousness into fragments to set the navigational board for an outward course, while also taking control of the turret mounted behind the cockpit and linking into the camera feeds from all of the outer viewers. It was a rather heady view soaring over the jagged mountains, lightning crackling all around us, and I found that I had to withdraw slightly from it, to keep myself from losing sight of the other inputs. Having drawn my consciousness back from the first-person view, I augmented it with sensor input from Kara's board and immediately saw a pair of bogeys coming into the atmosphere above us at about twenty clicks out.

I ran the specs of the weapons systems, found that Deke had a two-Megajoule proton accelerator slaved to the pilot's board and drawing power directly from the ship's reactor, while I was in control of the remote turret mounting a 300 Kilojoule heavy Gatling laser with a 5,000-round ammo reservoir. It wouldn't bring down a starship, but it would do fine if they sent assault shuttles after us.

I didn't bother asking Deke how he'd gotten his hands on the proton gun, which was illegal as hell for civilians---in the Pirate Worlds, you could buy anything and everything up to fusion missiles, if you had the money. Hopefully, it would give us an edge.

"Assault shuttles at oh-nine," I could hear Deke announce tightly almost at the same time that the sensors put the computer-generated delta shapes over the bright dots that had represented the bogies. "In range in forty seconds. I'm gonna' push her," he murmured, half to himself, as I felt the turbines step up a few degrees, "see if we can get far enough out to use the impellers before those boys hit us."



"They're going to have a ship up there," I reminded him. "Probably a big one if it can carry that many shuttles."

"Rock and a hard place, bud," he snorted. "Least we'll have a better view."

Shrugging with resignation, I directed my full attention to the laser's targeting AI unit, waiting for the Gomers to come into range. My gun actually had a longer reach in the atmosphere than the proton cannon, but it was less likely to knock them down with one burst---my main job would be to keep them off our ass and make them come around into Deke's sights, so he could blow the shit out of them. If they were smart, they'd break in different directions and try to use their greater maneuverability to its full advantage, which was where I'd come in.

I watched the distance indicator, keeping half of my attention on it and half on the shuttles, until they were just at the edge of my range---and then they split-S, jets flaming with acceleration, and began curving up beneath us.

"Shit, bring me over!" I yelled, but Deke was already angling us downward to the starboard to bring them into my firing arc, and I targeted the closest of them first, centering the computer-generated crosshairs on the enhanced delta image projected on the outside view and giving the mental order to fire.

The heavy Gatling belched out a thirty-round burst, the bright red flashes clearly visible in the vapor-laden air. A flashing yellow dot lit up the delta shape, the AI's way of telling me we'd scored a direct hit. The shuttle immediately broke right, putting his rear end, and the

plasma flame of his drive, towards my gun, and I swung the turret around to try to get a lick in on his wingman.

I was hoping to get the other shuttle to break off as well, in order to give us the time to clear the planet's grav field; but instead, he increased speed, willing to absorb a bit of punishment to get us into his firing range. I jammed a long burst down his throat, the red line of pulses connecting us for a full second, and the computer's hit indicator glowed a bright red. The color of the computer-generated halo around his ship told me there was a major heat blossom coming off of it, and I thought maybe I had hurt him, but he kept coming, only a second away from proton range. I wondered if Deke was going to give him a free shot, but he chose that moment to break left with a 9-G turn that threw me sharply against my restraints with a jolt that would have made a Normal black out.

The turn brought us nose-to-nose with the attacking shuttle, and both Deke and the shuttle pilot fired almost simultaneously. The white scar of a particle beam went wide right of us by about twenty meters, the atmospheric ionization sending a shudder through the ship---and through me. But Deke didn't miss; the eye-searing bolt of fusion-powered lightning that came from under our ship's chin impacted the shuttle's cockpit and speared it through the center. The assault craft's reactor blew in a blinding starburst of plasma plumes, and our ship nearly went out of control from the turbulence of the kilometers-distant explosion.

"Watch the other guy!" Kara warned us. "He's coming up behind us!"

Deke was still struggling for control of the *Dutchman*, but I could see the second shuttle arcing back, hoping to take advantage of the diversion to get a shot in on us. I swung the laser turret around, fighting to track him as the view from the outside cameras tumbled with the ship, and hosed a long burst from the Gatling. Half the shots went wildly into the night, but I finally locked on him, sent nearly two hundred rounds ripping into the port side of the aerospacecraft. A bright red halo circled the sensor delta, and the merc shuttle started into a tumble, some of its control surfaces obviously burned away.

The computer simulated a flare of white that indicated the shuttle had stoked up his engine output, trying to power out of his spin; but before he could compensate, Deke brought our ship back under control, bringing us around in a course perpendicular to the bogie's. I could almost feel Deke's mental whisper to the fire control system as the proton cannon gushed a gout of charged particles, connecting us to the shuttle for a brief moment. The merc craft vaporized in a ball of fusion fire, and then we were out of the atmosphere, the curve of the planet receding beneath us.

I hardly noticed the transition from gravity to acceleration, as the reactor ceased expelling inhaled air and began feeding off the ship's supply of metallic hydrogen until we could get far enough away from the planet to use the impellers. What I did notice was the computer construct that the sensor feed overlayed on the camera view.

"Bogie," Kara announced from the sensor board. "It's big and hot and coming right for us at three G's."

"That'd be that starship I mentioned," I sighed. "Not that I'm saying

'I told you so,' or anything..."

"It reads like a stock heavy freighter," Kara said.

"Yeah." I heard the sneer in Deke's voice. "And this is a luxury yacht."

"Not much chance we can outrun that, is there?" I asked hopefully.

"Maybe not outrun," he admitted, "but definitely outthink."

The acceleration that had pressed us back into our seats faded suddenly as Deke cut the flow of reaction mass to the fusion reactor, feeding power to the impellers. The *Dutchman* surged forward like it had been shot out of a mass driver, and the view from the cameras wavered as the gravimetric field distorted the incoming light waves, until the computer adjusted the image to compensate. Much to my surprise, however, we didn't shoot away from the merc starship, but toward it.

"Uh...Deke," I said aloud, twisting around in my seat, "is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"Did you ever hear," he asked calmly, turning to face me, "what would happen if two impeller fields physically contacted each other?"

"Oh, no," I moaned, remembering that lecture in the Academy.

"You're not going to try *that*, are you?"

"Try what?" Kara asked, eyes narrowing, head swivelling back and forth between us.

"Trust me," Deke muttered, grinning wildly.

"Oh, God." I put a hand to my forehead. "And I had such high hopes of living through this."

"What's going on?" Kara demanded.

"Advanced hyperdimensional gravimetric physics," I told her.

"When one warp field meets another, they tend to repel each other at the square of their combined velocities. There were a lot of experiments during the war to use that property to launch missiles and fighters at near-lightspeed."

"So what's the problem?" she wanted to know.

"Warp fields are inherently unstable," I explained. "They want to collapse in on themselves, and if you feed them too much energy, electromagnetic or kinetic, they will...to make that trick work, you've got to make sure the fields only graze each other at just the right angle, or else you're fucking neutrons." I was surprised at how matter-of-factly I could tell her this, considering the situation.

She turned away, her eyes, I was sure, seeing the image of the merc starship steadily growing in the viewer feed.

"So we're going to try to graze the enemy ship," she said, trying to sort things out, "and head off into space far enough and fast enough to give us time to build up jump power before they can catch us."

Deke shook his head. "Too easy. That's only half the plan."

"I'm not even going to ask what the other half is," McIntire sighed.

I was about to agree, but then the merc ship opened fire on us with its long-range lasers, the viewfeed enhancing the ultraviolet beams and turning them into scarlet threads seeking us through the blackness. We were going at a pretty good percentage of lightspeed, however, and burning in head-on, and the beams missed us, if only by a few meters. The merc craft, only now starting to move slowly in our direction on impellers, was visible on visual magnification as a boxy,

oblong, black monolith set against the far-off crescent of Thunderhead's moon.

I couldn't help but close my eyes as they tried to get a shot in with their proton accelerators, but the burst only grazed our shields. Then we were right on top of them, the huge flank of the two hundred meter-long ship looming in front of us, only a few hundred meters away...

I had this feeling that was not quite a feeling, just the feathery kiss of angels' wings across my spirit, and there was a burst of light so intense that I could see the veins in my eyelids. When I opened my eyes again, we were hurtling through space at what must have been close to lightspeed, the heavens gathered into a rainbow of brilliance ahead of our ship. Thunderhead was so far behind us that, if I'd been able to see it at all, it would only have been a distant star among thousands of others. Deke immediately began using the impellers to brake us, and the stars gradually spread out back into their usual pattern.

It was a long time before any of us spoke, but it was Kara who finally broke the silence.

"So," she said, as if nothing had happened, "what was the other half of the plan?"

Deke was sporting his best shit-eating grin. "We got nudged in one direction, but they had to get pushed in the other."

The outside viewfeed switched back to a few minutes ago, just after the ships' drive fields had touched, and showed us an extreme slow motion image of the merc starship hurtling out of

control...directly into the surface of Thunderhead's moon. There was a blinding fusion blast, followed by the softer spike of a volcanic explosion caused by the starship piercing the crust at relativistic velocity.

"Fuckin' A'," was all I could say. I couldn't help but think that Deke was still the best pilot I'd ever known---and the craziest.

"Well," Kara laughed quietly as the viewers switched back to the present, "we've left yet another epic disaster smoldering in radioactive ruins behind us. Where to next?"

"So far we've been running because we've been outgunned," I told her, loosening the straps of my safety harness. "We need some official help, and I only know one person who'd listen to us."

"Who you got in mind?" Deke wanted to know.

"Colonel Murdock," I told him, and his eyebrow went up.

"*The* Colonel Murdock?" Kara asked me. "The creator of *Omega* group?"

"Now General Murdock, head of StarFleet Intelligence. If anyone can help us, he can...once we know where to start."

"Where *do* we start?" Her eyes were on me. I looked to Deke, but saw that he was looking to me also. Great, I told myself, sighing.

"Maybe," I mused, "we should try starting at the beginning."

## Interlude: Damiani

The moon had risen high over the Alberta wilderness, bathing the endless expanse of Canadian pines in its pale glow. Andre Damiani leaned over the porch railing and sniffed the night air deeply, savoring its soft bouquet as if it were a glass of Chardonnay. As a child, he'd spent many summers here, at the family's estate outside Calgary--- summers when his father had been too busy to come down from his orbital offices. Here he'd found the closest thing to a home he'd ever experienced after years of boarding schools, tutors and an endless string of Corporate townhouses. One of his few regrets was that he wasn't able to spend enough time at this place.

"*Monsieur* Damiani." He heard Trint's cat-soft footsteps approaching behind him, turned away from the scenic view toward the open double-doors leading back into the conference room.

"Yes, I know," he sighed with some sadness at the interruption. "They're waiting."

It galled him to see the seven of them in this place that he still considered a refuge. They lolled about the oaken table, men and women who would have been obese but for the techniques of surgical bodysculpting, awash in the trappings of conspicuous consumption with their nano-tailored suits and Artificial-Intelligence wrist computers. In theory, they were his peers---the chairs of the Stonehenge of business monoliths that made up the Council---but in truth he held them in as much contempt as he did the politicians he



controlled.

Obsessed with the accumulation of wealth for its own sake, they had little understanding of the power they wielded, much less the proper use to which it should be put. That, Damiani acknowledged with a sigh, was the risk in dealing with inherited wealth. He'd had to guard against the narcissism and decadence himself, but his strength of will had kept him free of such weaknesses.

In a perfect universe, he would have put them to work digging cesspits on some agrocolony, but for now, they were a necessary evil. Best to simply get this over with as quickly as possible.

"Good evening," Damiani said, striding purposefully into the conference room. He pulled out a chair at the head of the table and took a seat. "I'm sorry if any of you were inconvenienced, but it was necessary we discuss these things in person."

"Oh, no problem, Andy," Cameron Weber drawled, resting his head back on his hands, stretching his legs out with an intentionally disrespectful casualness. "After all, I was only thirty *light-years* away." Andre fought to keep a scowl off of his face as he regarded the man who controlled most of the transportation industry. An old-money brat who fancied himself an adventurer, he'd long been Andre's nemesis---only constant vigilance kept the man from taking control of the Council.

"As I said, Cameron," Damiani continued, keeping his voice calm and friendly, "I'm sorry for the trouble, but we are at a critical juncture, and we must talk in private. We couldn't take the chance of some military Netdiver penetrating our systems and discovering

everything, just as our plans come to fruition."

"I still have my doubts about this, Andre." Celia Hitura shook her head, the hologram dolphins projected from her earrings flashing against her dark hair. The communication mogul's taste in clothes, Andre had to admit, was impeccable. "It will be wonderful, of course, if it works...But if we are found out, it would mean the end of everything. Would we not be better off simply accepting the post-election situation and attempting to ameliorate whatever legislation results?"

"This is quite a gamble," the rapier-thin man opposite Damiani agreed, steepling his long fingers thoughtfully. "None of us got where we are today by taking foolish chances."

*No, Andre thought, you all got here because a quirk of genetics.* Though that wasn't strictly true of the last speaker, Maurice Rasheed. The ebon-skinned director of the Commonwealth's largest agricultural corporation had started out as a mid-level executive over seventy years ago, and had worked his way to the pinnacle by a frightening combination of genius-level intelligence, predator's instincts and an absolute ruthlessness. Andre didn't consider him a rival---not the way Weber was a rival---but he knew if he made one mistake, Rasheed would be on him like a lion on a lame gazelle.

"It is a risk," Damiani admitted. "But I don't see that we have any choice. This isn't a simple situation. It's not just a question of influencing possible legislation if our man loses the election. The whole geopolitical balance is shifting and we have to act, not react. The Transition drive has opened the Cluster to anyone with the

resources to acquire a starship, and it is only a matter of time before a route out of the Cluster is discovered. Once that happens, the kind of control we now assert over the economy will be impossible.

"Limits on colonial settlement and individual transportation must be established, and to do so we must expand our control of the government. If and when the Northwest Passage is discovered, it must be by one of *our* scouts, and we must be the ones to exploit it. If this is not the case, all the accomplishments we have achieved will fall apart within a century. I don't know if I can make this any clearer to you."

He watched their faces, seeing them take it in and, in turn, accept it.

"All right," Cameron Weber agreed reluctantly. "Let's say that's the way it'll shake out. What I want to know is, how are we going to convince the military?"

"That's a good question," Celia said. "President Jameson can help us sell this thing to the Senate, but I don't see Admiral Sato or General Murdock being so easily deceived."

"Oh, I hope not." Damiani had to grin. "Because I have other plans for those distinguished gentlemen. I need you ladies and gentlemen to concentrate on wielding your influence in the Senate---while we still retain some influence. Don't worry about the military; I'll take care of them."

"Excuse me if I ask to hear the details, Andre," Maurice Rasheed interjected quietly.

"But of course, Maurice," Andre assented. "It's a simple enough

strategy. When hunting a tiger, it's always a good idea to have a Judas goat..."

## Chapter Seven

"I'm sorry," Deke said, shaking his head, "but I just don't see the point. The Corporates have had months to haul off anything they thought was important enough to look at. Going back to that system now's just a good way to waste a month."

I sighed, trying to think of another way to explain things to him. We'd been sitting there at the jump point for nearly an hour, waiting for the capacitors to charge and arguing about our course of action. As I saw it, we had to return to the Predecessor outpost that Kara had discovered. It was our only lead---our only hope of finding out what the Council was up to. Deke might be right, but I just didn't know what else we could do.

"Look," Kara spoke up, "I saw that base. It was huge, and it was crammed full of more equipment than the whole damned Commonwealth Corps of Engineers could even think about moving in ten years. The stasis chamber where I found the bodies was only a small part of it---the whole fucking mountain was hollow. Now I'm sure the Council research people took the corpses, and probably whatever was small enough to transport safely, but we're talking a technology so advanced we might not even understand half of it."

"The point is," I interjected, "they'll have to have left people there to guard and study it, and maybe one of them will know something we can use."

"Then why can't we wait until we get some support from the

Colonel?" Deke wanted to know.

"If we leave now," I explained patiently, "we'll get there in about two weeks. If we go to Murdock now, we're talking at least two months turnaround time. Up till now, they've apparently assumed we'd try to run for help, but after Thunderhead, they're likely to figure that we've *got* help. If we don't do this now, they're going to be ready for anything we throw at them. If we do it now," I shrugged, "we might have a chance."

"There's a comet halo around the system," Kara said. "If we come out near it, they probably won't detect us. We can sit out there and take a read on the situation before we jump in."

"At the worst," I pointed out, "we lose time. But we'll lose that either way. If you have a better idea, Slick, I'll listen."

Deke sighed heavily, scratching the side of his head, and stared silently at the viewscreen for a moment before he turned back to us.

"All right, we'll do it your way. But I'll tell you something, Farmboy," he said, his tone serious, but the nickname seeming more affectionate than derisive, "this is going to be risky as hell. I already lost one good friend today, one of the few people I could count on. I don't want to lose another."

"Nobody's gonna' lose anything," I declared, shaking my head firmly. "We've all lost too damned much already."

\* \* \*

The first day in Transition Space went by in silent isolation, with each of us replenishing our bodies and implants with rest and food, one of us watching the con while the others occupied the pair of small

cabins. Finding myself restless and unable to rid myself of that lingering image of Rachel torn and lifeless in the automed, I let the others go first and stayed in the cockpit.

Falling into the pilot's acceleration couch, I reached back to the little refrigerator built into the cockpit bulkhead behind my seat and pulled out a beer. I didn't normally go too much for beer, but I needed something to take the edge off. Popping the lid open, I tossed down a long sip. It wasn't too bad, as beers go, but it still had that bitter aftertaste that made me think I was drinking distilled urine.

"You worried about something, partner?" I heard Deke's voice ask from behind me, but didn't turn around.

"What? Me, worried?" I chuckled softly. "What would I have to worry about?"

"It must be pretty rough on you," he said, ignoring my denial, and stepping around to retrieve a beer for himself before leaning against the control console. "I mean," he said, pausing to take a swig, "me, I'm used to sleeping with one eye open, flying out under the radar and burning my bridges behind me. But you were always the type to put down some deep roots. It must be tough to leave it all behind."

I took another long draw on the beer, letting out a deep breath. Looking up at Deke's unreadable dark eyes and uncharacteristically serious expression, I thought of two younger men who had walked the knife's edge every day, with no one to rely on but each other. Were we still the same people, I wondered, or was I trying to play-act a decade-gone camaraderie because I had no one else to turn to?

"I'll be okay," I told him quietly. "I've got people counting on me to

come through this." I swallowed a mouthful of bitter liquid, choking back the aftertaste. "I'll be okay." I looked back up at him, eager to change the subject.

"Tell me something, Deke," I asked him. "Just how did you end up in the Pirate Worlds, anyway? When you shipped out, you were talking about going home to Canada, back to school, maybe getting into genetics with your parents."

"Maybe you just don't realize how much the war changed all of us," he muttered, turning away to stare at the bulkhead. "Your homeworld went through enough hell during the war that nobody noticed it when you came back changed, but Earth never got touched. I left home a cocky, naive teenager with a lot to prove to my parents and myself, and I returned a Goddamned killing machine. Society on Earth is a lot more structured than the colonies, even the older, more settled ones. There's no room for individualism, unless you've got a shitload of money, and there's certainly no room for out-of-work killers."

His gaze settled on a point on the deactivated viewscreen, but he was seeing something else.

"I got into a fight," he told me, his voice so quiet I could hardly hear it, "hurt a guy really bad. Almost killed him. When the cops came, I hurt some of them, too. I was drunk, stoned, and a war hero. Colonel Murdock pulled some strings, got me off. They gave me the choice of psych treatments or leaving the system for good." Taking a long pull on his drink, he sat silent for a moment. "I had a lot of pay saved up from the war," he finally went on, "so I put it and some money from my parents into the *Dutchman*, got the hell out of there



and never looked back.

"I knocked around the colonies for a while, trying to haul freight, even tried scouting minerals freelance for the Corporates, but the damned Patrol's all over independent spacers, and there's so many taxes and tariffs that you can't do more than break even...unless you haul shit under-the-table. I smuggled Kick, illegal ViR, guns...anything to pay the bills." He shrugged, looking down at the deck. "Things got too hot in Commonwealth territory, and I had to skip to the Worlds. Had a pretty good setup on Thunderhead---owned part of the *Bastard*, got a cut of the games, made a run every now and then, trying to build a stake." He snorted. "It's all gone now, I guess, except for the tradenotes I have here on the ship. Easy come, easy go."

Downing the last gulp of my beer, I sat there in silence, taking in what he'd said.

"Shit, Deke," I finally said, "I don't know if I should feel sorry for you or arrest you."

Deke's somber expression trembled, then cracked all the way, breaking into a full, heartfelt laugh. I started, finally couldn't help but join him, my shoulders shaking as I leaned back in the chair.

"Isn't this a bit out of your jurisdiction, Constable?" he asked, smiling broadly.

"Yeah," I admitted. "And I suppose it'd be tough for me to bring in federal help."

"So what's your plan, Lawman?"

I tossed my empty beer can over my shoulder and propped my

head on my hands, suddenly feeling ten years younger.

"Got a deck of cards?" I suggested. "And maybe something stronger than beer?"

"Constable Mitchell," Slick said with a grin, pulling a pack of playing cards out of his jacket pocket, "you've come to the right place..."

We were about halfway through our third game of poker and our second bottle of gin when Kara walked into the cockpit, rubbing a hand through her sleep-mussed hair. Regarding us with a wry smile, she stepped up to take a seat at the navigation console, snatching the gin.

"Is this a private game," she asked, taking a long draw off the bottle, "or can anyone play?"

"Deal the lady in, Slick." I laughed, slapping the edge of the copilot's station. Both Deke and I were thoroughly drunk by this time, of course.

"Next victim," he gloated, reshuffling the deck. "Got to warn you, love, I've already fleeced this sheep for a hundred t-notes, and I'm feeling exceptionally lucky tonight...today...whatever the hell it is in this fucking dimension."

"I can see I've got a lot of drinking to do to catch up to you two," Kara observed, tossing back another shot of gin, while Deke dealt her a hand and I shoved a pile of chips across the console to her.

"It may already be too late," I intoned solemnly, taking the bottle from her and gulping down a shot that, by this point, I hardly felt.

"So," Kara asked, taking her cards, "what's the ante?"

"Five bucks," Deke replied, placing a cigar between his teeth and lighting it with a dramatic flare, "but you may as well hand over all your money now, 'cause I'll have it eventually."

Kara considered her hand carefully, her face neutral, then lifted her eyes to face us once more.

"I bet ten." She threw the chips into the pot, giving Deke a challenging glare.

"Ooh," Slick chuckled, puffing on the weed, "we got ourselves a player with nerve."

He blew a cloud of aromatic smoke toward us, my chemical scanners warning me that the grey haze contained carcinogens and a complex blend of mild narcotics. Flicking ashes off the tip of the cigar, Slick flipped thirty t-notes worth of plastic into the pot.

"See you," he said, "and raise twenty."

Glancing down again at my hand, I shook my head. It was certainly nothing to write home about. I threw two cards down, took two more from Deke, and tried not to show my surprise---I had gone from a pair of deuces to three kings. Attempting to act as nonchalant as I could with that much alcohol running through my bloodstream, I saw Deke and raised five.

I could have used my augments to counteract the effects of the gin, but that would have violated the spirit of the occasion. We'd all been through a lot, with no clear end in sight, and spending the next two weeks dwelling on it wouldn't do anything but get us killed.

"How much did I lose to you on that run to Girru?" I asked Deke, leaning back and taking a drink while Kara ruminated over her bet.

"Eight hundred bucks." He laughed sharply. "But you won it all back during the mission, remember? When I bet you that you couldn't make it from the water storage tanks to the drop pod without getting shot?"

"Girru?" Kara looked up from her hand. "You two were on Girru?"

"Were we ever!" I snorted. "We almost stayed there, too."

"We were supposed to sneak in," Deke explained, puffing his weed, his voice going soft with the reminiscence. "Inject a virus in the base mainframe, try to contaminate their attack squadrons. God, I hated those sabotage jobs. Not that psi-ops were a piece of cake either, but at least then you got to nail them before they could take a pop at you. Anyway, we didn't have a lot of room in the drop pod, and it was supposed to be a stealth job, so we left all the heavy metal on the *Raven*." "Last time we made that mistake."

"No shit. So we drop out of the ship, and it pops back to the dark side of the larger moon, programmed to rendezvous with the pod in six hours."

"Bout three fucking hours too late," I muttered.

Deke turned on me with a look of annoyance. "You telling this story or am I?"

"Be my guest," I replied, waving my hands apologetically.

"Where was I?" He frowned, chewing on the end of his smoke. "Oh, yeah. So we drop down in the middle of this geothermal vent, with all this fucking steam everywhere to fuck up their thermal sensors, and run in---was nearly ten clicks, I think. We get in, past the sensors and the guards and shit, and we get spotted by a Goddamned

dog!"

"It wasn't a dog," I objected. "They call them Quori, or something. They're about the size of a large sheep, and some of the bases started keeping them to watch for infiltrators."

"Well, it looked enough like a dog," Deke insisted. "This fucking mutt smells us somehow, when no chemscanner can, and we wind up with this whole fucking base coming down on us, and all we have is our damned sidearms! I'll tell you, that was wild." He sat back, taking a long drag.

"So don't keep me in suspense," Kara prompted. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "We got lucky."

"Ha!" Deke snorted. "Lucky, my ass! Farmboy here has a gift for understatement. We were running around like a pair of virgins at a Marine R&R center, but we finally got out of the building and called the pod in."

"The tricky part," I put in, "was how to signal the ship to pick us up early---hard to put microwaves through a few dozen kilometers of moon. But we'd noticed that the Tahni had an Instel comsat sitting in a Lagrangian orbit, so we used their own satellite to bounce a signal to the *Raven*."

"And still damn near cashed it in," Deke complained, twelve years after the fact. "Not that the next mission wasn't even hairier..."

"Are we gonna' tell war stories all night or play cards," I grouched, looking forward to playing my hand. "What's your bet, Kara?"

"I see and raise you fifty," she replied.

"Shit," Deke drawled, blowing a puff of smoke. "Down to some

cutthroat poker, eh?" He held up his hand, peered at her suspiciously. "Dealer takes one," he said as he discarded. "And," he added, glancing at the new acquisition, "I'll see your fifty, and raise a hundred."

"Jeez," I grunted, sipping from the bottle. "I'm working on a cop's salary here." What the hell? If I lived through all this to pay off my debt, I'd consider myself blessed. "I call."

"Me, too," Kara said, pushing a stack of chips at the pile.

Deke grinned at each of us, then at his cards, before dramatically spreading the hand in front of us.

"Full fucking house," he cackled.

I threw my hand down in disgust. "Goddamnit. There goes a week's pay."

Deke was about to pull the pile of chips toward him, but Kara's outstretched hand blocked his way.

"Sorry, Captain Conner." She smiled broadly. "Royal flush."

Slick's jaw dropped as he stared at the hand, his cigar nearly falling from his mouth.

"Holy shit," he breathed. "Do you know how long it's been since I lost a poker game?"

"About five seconds," she told him straightfaced, raking in the pot.

Deke sat back, eyes wide, and breathed a heavy sigh. "Caleb, old friend, I think I'm in love."

"I think," I muttered, grabbing the bottle, "I need another drink."

## Interlude: Rachel

Rachel Mitchell floated in darkness, her brain trapped in a dreamlike state from which she couldn't seem to wake up, and she had almost come to the conclusion that she was dead. Only faint, semiconscious memories of armored men and the hibernation chamber of a starship held promise that she was alive, her bodily functions slowed down, her brain in a half-aware coma.

Yet that conclusion kept slipping into the fog that settled over her thoughts, swallowed by fleeting memories that seemed more real than her present. The fog parted suddenly before a dazzling light that solidified into the yellow glare of a beautiful, unceasing Canaan day...*real* day, not the pitiful imitation the Corporates had foisted upon them.

A cloudless, azure sky stretched above her, and she thought for a moment that her spirit was flying through it, having left the encumbrance of her body behind. But then her surroundings coalesced into a golden-brown field of wheat, nearly ready for the harvest, high as her shoulder. The stalks of wheat whipped gently at her bare arms and legs, and the sensation seemed to bring about a realization of the fact that she *had* a body once again. Suddenly, she could feel the denim of her shorts and the soft cotton of her shirt; she could hear the pneumatic hissing of the irrigation hoses and the far-away turbine-whine of an autoharvester...and a voice calling her name.

"Raaachelll," the call came again, annoyingly persistent.

She turned toward it and saw, with a cold feeling in her heart that could be a sensation of her present hindsight or perhaps a memory, Harry Paskowski striding purposefully toward her from the front porch of their little farmhouse. When they'd first been married she'd thought of the dwelling as "cozy." After two years of Harry, a more apt term seemed to be stifling.

"Rachel," he repeated as he approached her, seeming to be angry---but then, didn't he always seem to be angry? "Why didn't you answer me?"

"Sorry," she said automatically, though she didn't feel sorry in the least. "I was just thinking."

"Well, think about seeing to your daughter," he grumbled, his bearded face screwed up in barely-contained anger. She marveled at how she had once found that face pleasant, as the face of someone she could spend the rest of her life with. "She's crying about some damn thing or another." He jerked a thumb back at the house.

*So you left her alone, you stupid bastard,* she thought, not answering him as she started back toward the porch and the door left yawning open there. She didn't trust herself to speak to him when she was this irritated. Her cheek still burned with the phantom sting of two nights ago, the first time he had hit her.

He probably wouldn't do it again---she'd kicked him so hard in the nuts he'd spent an hour doubled over on the kitchen floor, and when he'd recovered she'd put the barrel of his hunting rifle in his face and let him know that if he ever struck her again she would blow his head off. She wasn't sure if that had really solved her problem. True, he



was a bully and a coward and once you backed one down they tended to stop confronting you. But that left extant the fact that she was *married* to a bully and a coward.

Leaving him and moving back in with her parents seemed the obvious solution to her...but, apparently, not to her mother. She'd called her last night, to tell her what had happened and ask her advice. She'd been less than helpful, more eager to blame Rachel than to tearfully invite her to come home to Mommy. Not surprising, considering this marriage had been more her mother's idea than Rachel's.

From the day Caleb had left for the Service Academy, Mother had pushed her into Harry's arms...or rather, into his family, which was highly placed in the Church. Never mind the fact that she didn't love the man...love was a child's conceit. The word had lost its meaning to her, as it had years before to her mother.

Anyway, she reasoned, stepping into the house to the tune of Angela's plaintive cries, if she left Harry, what would happen to their daughter?

Angie was sitting in the middle of the living room floor, amidst a puddle of spilled fruit juice, her fallen cup beside her, wailing her lungs off. Of course, it would have been too much of a chore for Harry to clean up the mess and take care of *his own God damned daughter*. Trying to control her anger, she lifted Angel into her arms, making comforting noises as she moved to the kitchen closet to get a mop.

It seemed that was all she did lately, control her anger and clean

up messes. Was that what it was supposed to be like? God knew it had been like that for her mother, but she just couldn't accept the fact that Caleb would have been a shorter, blonder version of Harry. As much as she'd resented Cal's leaving, at least he'd *cared* about something beyond himself---beyond the end of his nose. And events had proven him right. The war had expanded to envelope the whole Commonwealth, and millions had died.

Yet still the people here buried their heads in the sand, actually protesting the installation of orbital defenses. Even after all these years, her friends still talked about Cal as if he'd abandoned her, ignoring the nightmare unfolding all around them. But no matter what she'd thought of him for leaving, she couldn't imagine him blowing up at her over a malfunctioning harvester or getting violent because she'd gone into town without his permission. And she couldn't, she realized, mopping up the juice spill one-handed, imagine herself staying with this man for another day.

When he came back in, she would tell him...

"Rachel!" Harry exclaimed, bursting into the house. She turned on him, ready to deliver her decision, but the words froze on her lips as she saw the fear in his eyes. "Something's happening! There's all kinds of ships in the air!"

She felt a cold lump in her stomach as she moved past him out onto the porch, already hearing the roar of aircraft breaking the sound barrier overhead. Her eyes went to the yellow dazzle of the daytime sky, and, squinting against the glare, she saw the black dots in the distance growing swiftly into...

"Oh, my God," she whispered, hugging Angel against her, a wisp of the little girl's auburn curls passing across her vision.

"Ma-ma?" The one-year old had stopped crying, sensing her mother's distraction.

Rachel stared in disbelief at the menacing shadows thrown across the wheat fields by the black wedges of the Tahni assault shuttles, unable to accept that the war had finally come home.

"Rachel!" Harry's plaintive cry brought her to reality once again. "What are we going to do?"

"The storm cellar," she decided. "Get into the storm cellar!" Built to keep them safe during the hurricane-force storms of the Canaan Night, the shelter was the only safe place she could conceive of.

He pushed past her, sprinting through the living room, bouncing off of the hand-made furniture she'd picked out so carefully two years ago, through the kitchen to a heavy, duralloy door. Harry slammed into the storm-cellar door shoulder-first, and she stopped just short of running straight into him as he worked at the lock. The roar of the shuttles seemed to grow ever louder while he frantically punched the code into the keypad, the device mocking him with a disapproving beep as he entered the wrong digits.

Rachel chewed at her lip, glancing over her shoulder as if she could see the progress of the aerospacecraft through the plain white walls, absent-mindedly stroking Angel's hair to quiet her. Finally, Harry was rewarded with a cheerful acceptance tone from the keypad and the shelter door cracked open with a hermetic rasp, the dim red glow of the emergency lights inside illuminating the descending

stairwell.

"Get in!" Harry shoved her at the door desperately.

She lost her balance and steadied herself against the doorframe, feeling the vibration from the shuttle engines through the walls. Standing in the doorway, she glanced back at Harry, surprised he'd pushed her in ahead of himself...and then his body was framed with a red light that was the last thing she saw.

Her last conscious sensation was a pressure beyond sound and heat and falling...

The memory faded back into the haze of her hibernating hind-brain, sparing her the images she'd confronted when she'd woken from the blast. Lying in a shelter half-collapsed around her, the first sight she'd been faced with had been the charred and lifeless bodies of Harry and Angel. The missile, she'd discovered later---after her neighbors had dug her out and tended to her various burns, contusions and broken bones---had been intended for a Constabulary hopper that had made a futile attempt at resistance. The warhead had detonated against the wall opposite the shelter, and the blast had thrown all three of them into the cellar and blown the door closed. Only the fact that Harry and Angel had shielded her allowed her to survive, and for a long time, she wished she hadn't.

The resistance movement had given her a purpose---revenge---but nothing to change that feeling of guilt. Even Cal's return hadn't been able to eradicate it, only push it down into a dark corner she never disturbed...not awake. The last coherent thought she had was that if the death of a man she hadn't loved and a child she'd hardly had time

to know had left her a virtual emotional cripple, what would she do if they'd killed Cal? The only answer she received was a slide into darkness and then nothing...

## Chapter Eight

"Looks bad." Deke stared without enthusiasm at the readout from the long-range scanners. "That," he said, gesturing at the glowing blip orbiting the flat, brown circle that represented the Predecessor world, "is at least an armed freighter conversion, if not an actual military cruiser. And you can bet if that's what they have in orbit, they have at least a couple assault shuttles and two or three squads of guards on the surface."

"He's right," Kara had to admit. "If we jump in at minimum safe distance, that picket ship will have all day to cruise out and meet us, and its shields and weaponry have to be nearly cruiser class."

I stared silently at the readout holo, trying to think, trying to ignore the stale tang of reprocessed air. We'd converted out of Transition Space just outside the cometary halo about an hour ago, after a long two weeks confined in that oversized beer can, and I was ready to attack a cruiser barehanded just for the privilege of breathing fresh air again. But they were right---it didn't look too good.

"Okay," I finally said. "Let's assume that it's a converted freighter, like the one back at Thunderhead. That means it has pretty heavy armament, and a good-sized reactor, but not a military command structure. Commercial ships don't have redundant bridges---if we can get one or two good shots at the command center, it'll cripple them."

"So?" Deke shrugged. "We'd never get close enough to worry about it. They can stand off about a thousand clicks and hit us with long-range lasers until our shields overload."

"The key," I said, wagging a finger at him didactically, "is jumping

in close enough to keep them from being able to do that."

"But we can't jump in any closer than a ten planetary diameters," Kara pointed out, floating behind my right shoulder. "It's impossible."

"Not exactly impossible," Deke muttered, seeing where I was going, and not liking it. He fixed me with a hard glare.

"What's the matter?" I nudged him in the ribs. "It's okay if you play the long odds, but not me?"

"It's a bit like letting someone else gamble with your money, bud," he muttered sourly.

"Just what do you have in mind?" Kara shook her head. "I've been a pilot for over fifteen years, and, as far as I know, it's physically impossible to jump in or out closer than a ten diameters to any spatial body that masses more than ten million metric tons. The gravitational warping of local spacetime interferes with the formation of the Teller-Fox wormhole, and you wind up with half your atoms in Transition Space and half in realspace."

"That's what they tell you in Fleet pilot training," I conceded, "but it's only half the story."

"You were a spook," Deke told her, "you just got taught enough to get you on the planet unnoticed. We both got Attack Command training, which is a good deal more involved. Attack Command ships are mean animals---they're all capacitors and weapons, and they're built to handle multiple short-range jumps, so they can pop in and out between capital ships, lay out missile spreads and pop back out. That's pretty tricky, so they teach the crews a little more about the physics of it."

"For instance..." she prompted impatiently.

"Look," I explained, waving at the sensor readout, "this planet has a good-sized moon. Not as big as Luna, but pretty significant. The moon exerts a gravitational warping effect of its own, though not even half what the planet gives out. But if you can calculate the point---I'm talking down to a few clicks here---where the moon's gravitational pull is equal to that of the planet, and jump out of T-space at exactly that point, the warping effects will cancel each other out, and your exit hole will form."

"You're talking about the Lagrangian points, right?"

"Exactly." I nodded, encouraged.

Kara cocked an eyebrow. "And you've tried this, I suppose."

"Well, yeah, sure," I nodded. "Once."

"Once?" she repeated dubiously.

"Hey," I pointed out, "it obviously worked. I think we can figure out from our long-range sensors where we need to jump, and then it's just a question of number-crunching. What we need to do is arrive when the picket ship is between the moon and the planet---that way, we can be on top of them before they can get a clear shot at us."

She smiled, obviously unconvinced. "Oh, that should be no problem at all."

"It's either that or kill our power and coast in on a Hohmann transfer orbit. That should only take, oh, about eight *years*."

"All right, all right," Deke interrupted. "We've come this far, we might as well go for broke. This is going to take up some major computer time, so Cal, you link up and get the AI started on figuring



out where this system's Lagrangian points are. Kara, you work on the timing for our jump."

"And what are you going to do?" Kara asked him.

"Well," he snorted ruefully, "I *should* get roaring drunk, but since I'm going to have about ten seconds to get off a shot, I'm going to review what I've got in my personal and ship database about commercial freighters. Then," he added, "I'm going to start charging up the capacitors---we're going to need to have the backups charged to capacity to jump back out in time." He turned to me. "And we'll have to set everyone up with some heavy weapons and body armor. You know, of course, that even if this works and we can take that picket ship out, we're going to have to wade through two or three squads of mercs onplanet."

"Hell," I chuckled. "That'll be the easy part."

Four hours later, we were all stuffed into body armor, hanging with pistols and bandoleers of ammo, and strapped uncomfortably into our acceleration couches. I nervously waited out the countdown, fidgeting in my seat as images sprang unbidden into my mind of our atoms scattered across several light years. If anything went wrong, if even one of our calculations was a fraction off, nobody would ever know what had happened to us. Rachel and Pete and Jase would wait and wonder, and the Corporate types would keep hunting, but no one would ever know that our substance was scattered over the breadth of two different universes.

Even if it worked, Deke had one, maybe two shots to take out the enemy ship's bridge before they targeted us with their lasers---and the

shields on this bucket wouldn't even take *one* shot from a fusion-fed laser. Even if we did make it past the ship, they might blow us out of the sky with ground-based defenses... I tried to stop thinking, telling myself again that this had been *my* idea.

"Two minutes," Deke announced, unnecessarily---we were all plugged into the computer net. Sometimes, Deke talked to hear himself talk. He put up a cocky, brave face, but I knew him better than that.

Kara seemed impassive, staring at the forward viewers without really seeing them. Myself, I was scared shitless, but I'd been terrified so many times in my life, I was used to it. Fear, like loss and pain, is something mortals have to learn to live with.

I passed the last two minutes going over the image of the Corporate ship we'd faced at Thunderhead, searching for key targets I could hit with the laser. Deke would take out the command bridge with the proton cannon, and I doubted there was much I could do for that target that he couldn't, but if they had any weapons ports or Gatling turrets exposed, it'd be my job to try to take them out. Not that it was a vital part of our plan---as Deke had observed, this encounter would be decided within about ten seconds.

"Thirty seconds," Deke murmured to himself, powering up the impellers. We'd have to have a hefty prejump velocity to carry us across the distance to the enemy ship before they could react, so we'd started nearly a thousand kilometers back from our jump point, and would accelerate at a rate that would bring us to the point at just the right moment. Decelerating us on arrival would be Kara's job.

We'd done this trick before...once, on a mission that had wound up going bad. But then, we'd had exact astrographical specifications for the system, and there'd been little possibility for error. I would have liked to have done it when I infiltrated Canaan, but my home planet has no moon and, thus, no Lagrangian points.

The dicey part, aside from the physics calculations, was that we'd only be in T-space for a couple of seconds. We'd have to deal with a double-dose of the disorientation that a jump entailed in only a few brief moments, then immediately have to nail a pinpoint target at near point-blank range. For a normal human, it would have been damn near impossible; but with our headcomps and our neurolinks, we could detach ourselves from our neural input. It wouldn't cancel out all the sensation---it wasn't purely physical, as I understood---but it should allow us to be able to react fast enough.

"Ten," Deke droned. I tried to think of a prayer, any prayer, as fast as I could. "Nine..." Our Father, "...eight..." who art in Heaven, "...seven..." hallowed be thy name. "...six..." Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. "...five..." Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. "...four..." Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. "...three..." For thine is the power and the glory, "...two..." forever and ever. "...one..." Amen.

The world outside exploded in rainbow colors, my consciousness pulled in a million different directions at once, and we were swallowed up in darkness. But the god of hyperdimensional physics looked upon the darkness and said, "let there be light," and there was

one *hell* of a lot of light!

Polychromatic spots danced through a dazzling image of a huge, red-green planet separated from its amber moon by a monolithic starship that dwarfed them both on our screens. Our warp corona hadn't even faded before the Corporate spacecraft filled half the viewscreen, our prejump velocity sending us across the kilometers from our exit point to the ship's orbit in only seconds. I felt a giant hand pushing me forward against my restraints as Kara hit the braking thrusters, the flares of their twin, fusion-heated hydrogen flames shooting out from below and to either side of the *Dutchman's* nose.

Then there was no more time to think, only time to act. The CSF ship was a lighter, similar to the one that we'd destroyed at Thunderhead---a converted commercial freighter---but it was heavily armed with weapons pods bristling awkwardly from hardpoints designed to carry cargo handling equipment. Even as I saw the dazzling spear of ions lancing out to strike at the bulbous protuberance along the freighter's spine that I knew to hold its bridge, I was swinging the Gatling turret around.

The laser pulses were invisible in the vacuum of high orbit, but the computer was gracious enough to simulate them for me quite convincingly with a line of red dashes that connected us to the portside weapon's pod for nearly three full seconds. Jets of flame streamed from the pods innards, and I fired another long burst, targeting the same spot. This time I must have hit the propellant for one of the missiles, because the whole pod burst apart in a blast of light that rocked the ship.

Then we were moving past the picket ship, and I switched to the rear view to see the big freighter trailing yellow fire from its bridge and weapon's pod. Deke, I saw, had scored a direct hit on the bridge, and, if the oxygen flame pouring from the command center was any indication, I doubted there was anyone left alive in that section.

"I'm coming around for a pass at the drives," Deke told us, his voice tight. "Keep your eyes open for assault shuttles."

We were pressed into our acceleration couches as he swung the *Dutchman* end for end, opening up the fusion drives at what felt like five gravities. The little ship shot back toward the injured CSF lighter, this time coming in from the big craft's rear, towards its dark fusion drives. We probably couldn't penetrate deep enough to take out their reactor, or even damage their warp units, but if we took out their fusion drives, they wouldn't be able to reach minimum distance to use their impellers.

Deke slowed us with a blast from the braking rockets, then knocked our nose down a few degrees with the maneuvering thrusters before he targeted the engine ports and fired the proton cannon. Scintillating lightning bolts streaked into the maw of the drives, producing glittering showers of sparks and a cloud of incandescent gas that poured out of the ports and slowly dissipated. I opened up with the Gatling as he waited for the capacitors to recharge, playing the burst over the magnetic coils that lined the inside of the starboard drive port. The superconducting electromagnets that had survived the proton blast fragmented and burst under the hail of pressure pulses, and Deke took out the portside coils with another shot from the

particle accelerator.

"Check the docking bay," I warned Deke, trying to get a look at it through the side viewers. We hadn't seen any shuttles yet, which meant they were either onplanet or in the bay.

"Roger." He brought the former missile cutter beneath the lighter, down to the small, open bay nestled against the belly of the big ship.

A delta-winged assault shuttle was already attempting to launch, its maneuvering thrusters flaring as it floated too slowly out of the open doors. It was only halfway out when a stream of protons intercepted it, coring it like an apple. The shuttle flared plasma and disintegrated, the explosion taking most of the hangar bay with it, a secondary blast tearing through the outer hull with spears of glowing plasma.

"She's finished," Deke decided, pulling the *Dutchman* away from the CSF ship. "We're heading down."

Deke nosed the cutter into the atmosphere, heading for the site of the cave entrance. When Kara had landed on the world, she'd been forced to find a level plain at the foot of the mountain, and walk up, but we assumed the Corporate engineers would have carved out a landing pad by now.

The cautious part of my mind that had kept me alive during six years of a dirty war whispered that I should be worried about ground-based antiaircraft batteries, but I dismissed the thought after a moment's consideration. They weren't expecting attack. If they had been, we'd have never made it this far.

So we blasted into the mountains at full throttle, both gravity and

the startlingly loud roar of the drives returning with the atmospheric entry. We skimmed the peaks at less than two clicks up---if the picket hadn't been able to warn the dig site, we didn't want to alert their sensors too early. This was almost going too well. I chuckled to myself, remembering a line I'd read in some old book---I'm paranoid, but am I paranoid enough?

The dig site came into view within a few minutes, though it looked much different now than what Kara had described. The draw she and her partner had walked up had been leveled, probably by explosives, to make room for a large landing pad, now occupied by a pair of assault shuttles and a larger cargo lifter. The cave entrance had also been enlarged, presumably to carry excavated Predecessor relics out to the lifter, and a trio of armored mercenary guards were clustered outside of it, looking upward at us, pointing frantically.

While Deke brought the *Dutchman* around in a lazy arc, I spun the Gatling turret and laid down a barrage of fire that cut down the guards, then tracked over to the shuttles. I chopped a long burst across the wings of one of the assault craft, blowing glowing fragments of graphite insulation off of the surface of it, and then Deke had the proton accelerator lined up. A single blast consumed the cockpit of the shuttle I had targeted, and he had time to put another shot through the portside wing of the other craft, shattering the delta shape and toppling the shuttle on its starboard side, burning.

"Hang on!" Deke warned us, hitting the braking thrusters to halt our arc, then feeding hot plasma to the landing jets.

We came down fast and landed hard, but Kara and I were halfway

out of our acceleration couches before we touched on the cutter's five landing treads. Deke was right behind us as we rushed into the equipment bay, throwing open the concealed locker that held the various personal weapons he had accumulated. While he and Kara grabbed pulse carbines, I retrieved the light Gatling from its hiding place, hefting its weight. I only had the thousand rounds I'd salvaged from the groundcar, but I hoped that would be more than enough.

The belly ramp lowered with a moan of hydraulics and we jogged down it with Kara in the lead. Despite the fact that the world was half again Earth's size, the gravity was actually a tad lighter than Standard due to the lighter materials in the planet's core, and I felt the extra spring in my step. Deke and I ran a quick check of the cargo module while Kara stood watch, but the lifter was deserted, and we made our way into the cave entrance.

Not only had they carved out the opening, but a wide ramp, lit by rows of chemical striplamps, had been tunneled through the floor of the cave, down into the main chamber where Kara had found the corpses. We headed down it at a slow jog, me in the lead with the Gatling, the others behind me in a loose wedge. We were nearly twenty meters down it before the opposition showed its face---a CSF merc fireteam came running around the corner onto the rock ramp, probably sent to check out the explosion of the shuttles. They almost ran into us before they realized what was happening.

Mirrored visors covered their faces, so I couldn't see the surprised looks I was sure were present beneath, but their pulse carbines coming up spoke volumes. I took three of them out with a short burst from



the Gatling, the servomotor whine of the spinning barrels nearly drowning out the snap-crack of the laser pulses as a sheaf of crimson sliced through their armor. The other two dropped almost as quickly to Deke and Kara's carbines, and she ran forward to take up an overwatch position at the end of the ramp. Coming up against the lighter, raw rock on the right-hand side of the wall where the ramp had been carved out of the original entrance, she stuck her head around the corner to check for more Corporate mercs.

She waved us forward, and I fell into a crouch at the edge of a huge chamber beneath a hollowed-out mountain. It went on as far as I could see, literally for kilometers, with the alien shapes of the Predecessor machines arranged like some kind of eerie playground.

"They've taken out a lot," she informed us. "It looks like everything small enough to be moved is gone."

Whatever had been done, what remained still retained the unreal, almost illusory quality of which Kara had spoken. It was as if their machinery---if it *was* machinery---had been designed by an abstract sculptor as one constant piece of art, kilometers across. Here and there, I could see interruptions in the natural progression of it all, where items had been removed; and, far in the distance, I saw the activities of the Corporate Research Division team.

Their skeletal equipment scaffolds climbed the backs of the larger pieces of Predecessor machinery, surrounding it with sensor gear and low-glare floodlamps that bathed the entire chamber in their soft glow. From this distance, I couldn't make out any human shapes. Apparently, either no one else had heard our activities---which I could

believe with the odd acoustics in the cavern---or the remainder of the guards were lying in wait for us somewhere in the twisted maze of mechanisms.

"We'll have to split up," Deke decided, face expressionless.

"Otherwise, someone's going to get past us."

"Okay," I agreed. "How do you want to play it?"

He motioned with the barrel of his pulse carbine. "You go right, around the perimeter. I'll go left, and Captain McIntire, you go right up the middle. We meet up at the opposite end, then turn around and go back the same ways if we haven't found anything."

"Keep in contact---let us all know if you find anything. And remember, we want to take at least one of the technicians alive, but if we can't find them, try to bag one of the guards." I looked them both in the eye. "Good luck."

With that, we went our separate ways. I took off toward the right side of the chamber's perimeter, scanning on infrared, thermal and sonar. If the bulk of the guards weren't aware of our presence, they'd likely either be on break somewhere or clustered at posts around the more important excavations, and those should show up on thermal and sonar. If they did know we were there, and were trying to ambush us, they'd still be expecting us to come to the digs. Either way, that's where the action would be.

I hoped Deke would be okay. He'd seemed uncharacteristically keyed up and tense once we'd hit the ground. There hadn't been time to talk to him about it, but it was unlike him. So was wanting to avoid this fight. Had that much changed since the war? Were we all

that different? It had seemed just like old times, getting drunk and playing poker on board ship, but the feeling hadn't lasted too long. I'd come to him because there was no one else I could trust, but could I really trust him anymore? I shook my head to clear the lingering questions---I'd just have to concentrate on the task at hand and let this one play itself out.

Just inside the right side of the entrance was a parking area for the excavation's hoppers and crawlers---the area, I guessed, where the guards who'd attacked us had been posted. I moved through it carefully, meandering between the machines to make sure no more of the men were hiding among them. I tried to keep from letting my eyes wander around the huge chamber, but I couldn't help but be amazed at the power it must have taken to carve this place out.

I let myself have a glance at the roof, saw that a vast section of it, stretching from just in front of the ramp to nearly two hundred meters in front of me, was artificial; it seemed as if it could be opened to allow ships to descend. Moving on past the parking area, my suspicions were confirmed: running the breadth of the kilometers-wide chamber were a line of four large, circular embankments that could only have been landing pads. Each of them had to have been at least five hundred meters in diameter and nearly ten meters high, and they seemed to have been carved out of the rock.

I shuddered involuntarily. I was glad the pads were empty. I didn't want to think what the Corporates could do with access to Predecessor starships---unless they had access to the Predecessors themselves. They'd sure as hell convinced Fourcade they did. Yet,

somehow, I couldn't bring myself to believe that. Maybe I just didn't want to. Or maybe I had a hard time accepting the idea that a race of beings that had been flying starships before humans discovered fire could be conned by the Corporate Council into cooperating with some scheme to grab more power. It was much likelier that they'd deceived the Predecessor Cultists...and much more comforting a thought.

Past the landing pads were a series of a half-dozen oddly-curved columns that stretched a good hundred meters from floor to ceiling. I had no idea what they had been used for, but from the scaffolding surrounding them, the Corporates must have thought they were important. I approached the rightmost of the structures carefully, but I didn't immediately notice any activity around them. I wondered if we'd been lucky enough to catch the research crew on a sleep cycle. It was late afternoon outside, but down here, under tons of rock, that wouldn't mean much.

Clinging to the shadows beneath the scaffold, I began to move on, but hesitated at the nearly-inaudible scrape of shoes on rock floor. My headcomp dissected the sound, deciding that it was one person approaching from ahead of me and to the right. I gently set the Gatling laser on the ground beside the scaffold and pulled the sonic stunner Deke had provided from its shoulder holster. I was taking a chance. If it was a guard, he'd be wearing a shielded helmet, and I'd have to switch to hand-to-hand pretty damn quick.

I pressed myself as far back into the darkness beneath the Predecessor column as I could, wishing for my wartime combat suit and its chameleon camouflage, and waited for the walker to come into

view. He was an ordinary-looking human male, and from his white coveralls and the computer handset he was carrying, I took him for a technician. Not as good for our purposes as one of the researchers, but maybe he could tell me where to find one.

I set the stunner for its lightest setting, aiming carefully as the slim, dark-haired tech stepped toward a scanning device built into the scaffolding around the column. Squeezing the trigger, I felt rather than heard the feedback from the intense subsonic vibrations directed out the bell-shaped muzzle, and saw the technician jerk and slump forward to the ground without a word. Stuffing the stunner into its holster, I scanned the immediate area to make sure no one had seen us, then grabbed the unconscious technical worker by his collar and dragged him back into the shadows.

*Deke, Kara, I transmitted to them, hold up where you are. I'm interrogating one of their technicians. I'll let you know when it's safe to proceed.*

*Read you,* Kara replied over her mastoid comlink. I waited for an acknowledgment from Deke, but received none and decided I couldn't risk holding off any longer.

I hauled the technician into a sitting position against one side of the column and slapped him across the face to try to bring him awake while I drew my Gauss pistol from its holster at my hip with my other hand. His eyes fluttered open, and he moaned softly, hands going to his temples. Even a light sonic gives you a hell of a headache. I shook his shoulder, and his eyes suddenly opened wide, focusing directly down the large bore of my slugshooter. He drew in a breath

to cry out, but I put a hand across his mouth, shaking my head.

"If you try to call for help," I whispered to him softly, "they'll be cleaning your brains off the side of this column for a week. If you have a neurolink or a mastoid comlink, don't think about using it. Anyone shows up, you'll be the first to die. Nod if you understand."

He wagged his head jerkily, eyes still fixed on the business end of my pistol. I slowly took my hand off of his mouth.

"All right," I went on, "I've got some questions, and you damn well better have some answers I like. The first question you don't answer," I warned, extending my talons and waving the blades in front of his suddenly pale face, "I'm going to start cutting things off. Understand?"

He nodded, beads of sweat trickling slowly down his forehead.

"What's your job here?" I asked him.

"T-technician," he said a bit too loud.

"Softly," I hissed, pressing the edge of a talon against his throat.

"What's your name, technician?"

"Prohl," he rasped. "Gaston Prohl."

"Well, Gaston Prohl, my good friend, I need you to tell me who's in charge of this little project."

"Director Costanza," he answered immediately, seemingly eager to direct my attention to some other target. "He's back in the stasis chamber," Prohl volunteered, gesturing at the area into which Deke had headed. "That's where he sleeps."

"Is that where they found the bodies of the Predecessors?" I asked.

His eyes went wide, full of obvious shock that I knew about the corpses, but he nodded.

*Deke, I transmitted, if you're reading me, the director of this project's in the stasis chamber, where Kara found the corpses. See if you can find him.*

Still no answer. Maybe the Predecessor machines were blocking the signal.

I turned my attention to my captive. "All right, Technician Prohl, you obviously know about the Predecessors, so am I right in assuming that you know what this place is?"

"Yeah," he replied in a choked voice. "We...we weren't really supposed to, but it's pretty obvious. I...I kind of heard Director Costanza talking about it to some high-up Council exec that visited."

"Are the bodies still in the stasis chamber?" I asked him, already guessing the answer.

He shook his head slightly and I backed my talons off enough to let him do it. "They were taken out right after we got here. It was all real hush-hush."

"And you wouldn't have heard where they took the bodies, and all the rest of the gear they moved?"

"They kept it real quiet," he insisted. "They didn't want us to know."

Now, another side benefit of my implants that their designers probably hadn't intended was that the thermal imaging and sonic analyzers could be used as a kind of lie detector---when unaugmented humans lie knowingly, their body temperature goes up, and there's a barely-perceptible change in their voice stress. I got that kind of reading from Prohl when he tried not to answer my question.

"Now," I said, pressing my talons against his neck just hard enough to break the skin and draw a trickle of blood, bringing a sharp gasp out of him, "let's try that again, Technician Prohl. Where did they take the bodies?"

"All right, all right," he hissed, and I drew back the blades. "I...I heard that Council guy say something about how they would be going crazy over the bodies at 'the Rock.' I don't know anything else, I swear!"

"The Rock'," I repeated. "That's all you heard?"

He never got a chance to answer. I don't know if it occurred on a conscious level, or if my headcomp detected the danger and put me in motion for my own survival---it happened too fast. But one moment I was leaning over Prohl, and the next I was lunging away from him, one hand snagging the Gatling laser. I was only a half a second ahead of the barrage of crimson pulses that nearly sliced the luckless technician in half, impacting all around him on the Predecessor column/machine.

I rolled into a crouch, pulling the Gatling off of the floor where I had dragged it to and swinging it around to cover the squad of CSF mercs that had closed in on me. I walked the heavy weapon from left to right, the high-power pulses blowing dinner-plate-sized holes through four of the guards who were attempting to outflank me.

I didn't wait to see where the others were; I just sprang to my feet and ran through the area the four mercs I had shot had come through, forward and slightly to the left of the column I had been hiding behind. If they'd been trying to surround me, they'd have spread



themselves thin, and maybe I could surprise them.

Sure enough, I heard panicked shouts from my right rear, as they realized I'd slipped through their trap. Bright threads cracked into machinery and rock all around, but I was too difficult a target moving at superhuman speed through the spirals and curves of the Ancient's devices. I passed between a low block of equipment and a huge vat that bubbled with chemical activity, nearly running headlong into another pair of guards coming around the other side of the vat. They stopped short at the sight of the Gatling's muzzle, then stopped forever when that muzzle flared with the light of half a dozen hyperexplosive lasing cartridges. The dazzling pulses of coherent light, calculated to cut through vehicle armor, heated the internal fluids in the two men's chests and blew them apart in a steam explosion that splattered me with gobbets of tissue and burning blood.

I wiped my eyes clear of the offensive material, idly wondering how much the CSF paid their hired soldiers and deciding it couldn't be enough. I paused for a moment to scoop up one of the dead men's pulse carbines and sling it across my back. If it came down to any closer quarters than this, I might have to dump the Gatling. Spare weapon secured, I pushed off across the mildly slick floor, detecting the rest of the squad moving up behind me and to the right, and more movement ahead and left. I heard an alarm going off in the distance, and I hoped that Deke or Kara had found the director, because I seemed to be in the center of a rapidly converging shitstorm.

The CSF mercs came up quickly to block my path, pairs of them stringing through every open pathway, aiming bursts of laserfire my

way. Pulses striking all around me, I hosed almost fifty rounds at the closest of them, downing two before the others took cover. That gave me the opportunity to head down one of the unblocked paths between a large clump of tall, spindly poles and a pyramid-shaped structure with no visible doors.

"God damn," I whispered to myself. Open paths were quickly becoming scarce, and I knew I couldn't take them all on, not on the run like this. I had to find a place to make a stand, somewhere with three walls to make them come at me right down the maw of my Gatling.

Either that or I needed someone to get behind them and drive them into my fields of fire...

Almost as if on cue, cries of surprise and panic arose from the rear of the troops, intermingled with the sharp cracks of pulse weapons, and several of the mercs broke from their positions. I cut down three that mindlessly came down my way, then waded in through the ranks of the others while their attention was turned to whoever was hitting them from their rear.

I had to pick them off by ones and twos as they showed themselves, but it wasn't another five minutes and six dead mercs before the firing died out. I made my way forward slowly and cautiously, finally walked up to Kara McIntire, who was advancing from the other direction, her pulse carbine held at high port.

"Thanks," I said.

"Heard the firing," she told me. "Thought you could use some help."

"Let's find Deke." I turned back to the direction of the stasis chamber. "I haven't been able to get ahold of him."

"There's a lot of interference in here," Kara said without conviction, following me back around the pyramid, past a large, spherical construct.

"Yeah." I shrugged, hoping he was all right.

*Deke, I tried again. Deke, where are you?*

*Over here.* I finally got a reply and homed in on the signal.

*Between the big mushroom and the wall.*

"This way." I led Kara past the sphere, angling farther to the left, through a forest of tall cones, up to a vaguely mushroom-shaped...thing, and around it.

Deke was there, leaning against the wall, the left sleeve of his black fatigue shirt shredded beneath the armored vest he wore. Blood was dripping off a nasty slash on his arm, but the blood that coated the front of his vest wasn't his---it belonged to the body on the floor in front of him.

"You okay?" I walked up to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah," he grunted, leaning down to pick his Gauss machine pistol off the floor and reholster it. "No thanks to this jackhead," he added, motioning toward the corpse on the floor.

He was a human male, dressed in a chameleon-camo armored suit and half a hood---the other half of the hood and, not incidentally, the face within, had been ripped away by Deke's talons. A quick thermal scan told me he was packing some bionics, and the wrist sabres extending from both arms looked to be implanted rather than worn.

"What the hell is he?" I wondered. "I've never seen anything like this with the CSF."

"I have," McIntire told me, staring at the corpse. "He's part of the Executive Group's personal bodyguard. I saw a holo of them in briefing on the Council Chairman, Andre Damiani."

"I'll be damned happy if I never see one again." Deke walked over to where his pulse carbine lay by the wall, picked it up and examined it ruefully. The thermoplastic stock had been sliced clean through just behind the pistol grip, rendering the weapon nearly unusable.

I unslung the one I'd picked up, handing it to him. "You never could learn to take care of your equipment," I told him, grinning.

"Let's get to the stasis chamber," Kara urged impatiently. "If the director's even still there."

"She's right," I nodded. "I got a little from that tech, but we need more."

I took the lead again, Kara and Deke in a loose wedge behind me, and we hugged the wall all the way up to the stasis chamber. I recognized it from Kara's description---a large, high-ceilinged room offset from the rest of the cavern, yet open to it. The glassy wall she had told us of, which had enclosed the Predecessor corpses, was gone, along with the corpses. What was left was whatever machinery that had been too deeply entrenched in the rock to easily remove...and a dead man.

I kept half an eye on the chamber entrance while Kara turned the body over. He was a human male with pale skin and almost white hair. He was a bit on the thin side, and nearly two meters tall,

dressed in tailored white coveralls with numerous pockets for various instruments. His throat had been slashed wide open, and he was lying in a pool of his own blood.

"Director Costanza, I presume," I muttered, any feelings of hope I'd had fading quickly.

"Who killed him?" Kara asked, looking straight at Deke.

"Hey," Deke protested, "how the hell should I know? Maybe it was that goon that came after me."

Kara seemed to think about it, finally shrugging.

"It's possible," she admitted. "He could have had orders to kill the director if anyone attacked."

"So what do we do now?" Deke wanted to know. "Try to snag some of the other techs?"

I shook my head, trying not to think the dark thoughts that floated at the edge of my consciousness. "It'd be a waste of time. If any of them knew anything valuable, they'd have been killed, too. We need to get out of here, get to a long-range transmitter."

"What about this place?" Kara wondered.

"What do you mean?" Deke asked her, not comprehending.

"Can we just leave it all here for the Corporates?" she asked. "Shouldn't we try to destroy it? After all...what if we can't stop them?"

I frowned thoughtfully. I honestly hadn't considered that.

"We could use the heavy cargo lifter outside," she proposed. "It's probably fusion-powered. We could program it to fly into the entrance and overload its reactor."

"Well, it certainly fits in with our pattern of wanton destruction." I looked to Deke. "What do you think?"

"I hate to do it," he admitted, rubbing his injured arm. "The technology in this place could be worth a fortune...enough to buy your own Goddamned planet."

"Assuming we're alive to buy it," I muttered. I mulled it over for a second. If anyone was going to believe us, we might need this place for proof. On the other hand, I wasn't honestly too sanguine about our chances of surviving, and at least we could deprive the Corporates of the high-tech treasures they'd left here. "All right," I decided.

"We'll blow the place. Deke, you go prep the *Dutchman* for takeoff. Kara, go program the lifter." I hefted my Gatling laser. "I'll stay at the front entrance and make sure no one interferes with us."

We were in orbit before the lifter's reactor went critical, but the fusion blast that resulted was clearly visible on the daylight side as an eye-searing burst of light that blanked out our screens. I watched it with little satisfaction, as it signaled a realization deep inside of me that I had given up any illusions of living through this. At least we were royally screwing up the bastards' plans.

Kara didn't say another word till we were in Transition Space. Deke had gone back to have his arm taken care of by the automedic, leaving her and I alone in the cockpit. She waited a few minutes after he left, then turned to me from the copilot's seat.

"Do you trust him?" she asked me bluntly.

I wasn't surprised at the question; I'd seen the look on her face back in the stasis room. I thought about it a second before I answered

her, finding the subject troubling. "Maybe I'm naive," I finally replied, "but he was my partner. Until he proves different, I've got to trust him."

"It *could* have been the Executive bodyguard," she admitted. "And I guess the machinery could have blocked off your signal."

"And that's the way we'll have to play it," I told her. "But you keep your eyes open. If he is..." I couldn't bring myself to finish the thought.. "If he is..." the words hissed out reluctantly, "I might be blinded by my loyalty to him." She nodded, patting my shoulder comfortingly.

But there was not a damn thing that would make me feel comfortable again.

## Interlude: Damiani

Trint stepped into the ViR chamber as hesitantly as he'd ever done anything in his life. He'd been advised when he'd come into Damiani's service never to disturb the man here, no matter what the circumstances, and he'd never been called in here...until now.

Damiani was in the center of the padded room, dressed in a loose-fitting white gi, going through the motions of martial arts combat with an opponent only he could see, a man or woman somewhere halfway around the world in another chamber like this one. It was all so convenient and bloodless. Trint found it somehow...effete. Was this culture so morally bankrupt that they could not bear the sight of their own blood?

He watched in silence as his master---he'd long ago abandoned the fiction of "employer"---put the finishing moves on his spectral sparring partner, bowed and wiped sweat from his brow. Why not simulated sweat, Trint wondered.

"I've received a message," he told Trint without preamble. "He tells me they've attacked the dig."

"Is it damaging?" The Tahni asked, digesting the information.

"Not as badly as it could have been," Andre replied, retrieving a towel from a hook on the wall and wiping himself down. "He managed to kill the director of research before they could question him. Still, they destroyed the Predecessor equipment we hadn't been able to relocate, and they probably feel they have enough to go to



Murdock."

"The Fleet Intelligence General?" Trint guessed. Damiani nodded. "Still, your plan will come to fruition before they can discover anything." It was half statement, half hopeful question---though not hopeful in the direction Damiani would have thought.

"Possibly," Damiani allowed. "Perhaps even probably. They plan to meet at the Centauri Belt---he feels this would be the best time to hit them."

"These people were his comrades in arms," Trint pointed out. "Will he be able to have them killed?"

"I've been considering that," Damiani admitted, stripping out of his top as he led the Tahni out of the room into the showers. "I'm not certain whether or not I want them terminated yet. There may be a way to use them to further our objective. I want you," he told Trint, stepping out of his trousers and hanging the *gi* on the wall outside the shower stall, "to manage this for me. Take a Corporate courier---one's been prepared for you---and go to the Belt. Watch him. If he can make this work, leave him alone. But if you judge there's a probability that he might be turning on me, kill everyone. Whatever the outcome, contact me immediately."

"Here?" Trint asked, trying to conceal the excitement that coursed through him. This couldn't be happening...it was some cruel trick Damiani was perpetuating for his own amusement.

Andre shook his head. "I'll be at the Capital. Events there will soon require my presence."

"Yes, sir," the Tahni nodded, as the Corporate Chief Executive

pulled open the shower door.

"Oh, and Trint." Damiani turned back to him, tone businesslike, but eyes hard. "I believe you've known me long enough to realize that I am not a trusting soul. Just in case you start feeling overly independent while your out there on your own, you should never forget that little guarantor of loyalty implanted in your cerebral cortex." He pursed his mouth thoughtfully. "You know, I'm not even sure if it would kill you, considering your...construction." He smiled coldly. "But I doubt you'd be enjoying life. Besides," he concluded, entering the stall and closing the door, "where would one such as you go?"

"As you say, Monsieur Damiani," Trint muttered quietly, not caring that the water muted his words, "where could I go?"

## Chapter Nine

I have never felt so naked in my life as when I walked into the *Wanderer's Home* without a gun. I knew, on an intellectual level, that it was necessary. No self-contained space habitat, not even on the wild fringes of the Centauri Belt, allowed any civilians to carry firearms, simply because of the risk of decompression.

Not that it was a real danger on Belial. The aptly-named pleasure station was constructed from a "blown" asteroid. Some independent investors---back before the Corporate Council, when there had been such a thing---had taken a basically spherical, nickel-iron asteroid, drilled a narrow hole down its center, filled it with water and then exposed the thing to sunlight amplified by large mirrors. The resultant steam pressure produced a hollow tube of compressed ore, in this case nearly thirty meters thick. Spin was imparted to produce near one gravity at the lowest levels. The "open" ends were sealed by transplas, with reflectors mounted to provide natural sunlight, and a pair of huge docking rings were connected through the core with a non-spinning transport tube.

You'd have to have a hell of a handgun to penetrate thirty meters of nickel-iron, but I suppose it made sense on a pleasure station to try to keep the customers from shooting each other indiscriminately. I *was* allowed the vibroshiv I carried tucked in my belt---after all, this was the wilder end of the Belt, and knife duels were a cherished tradition.

Deke also concealed a blade, beside the talons that were our

constant companions; and Kara had decided to pack two, after the customs officials had forced her to drain the power pack for her implant laser. They hadn't wanted to allow her in at all after their security scanners had revealed the device, but had finally settled on an interlock chip inserted beneath the surface of the synthskin on her wrist that would notify them if she attempted to recharge the weapon. She wasn't too thrilled about being quite literally disarmed.

Myself, I'd carried a gun for most of my adult life, and I'd grown accustomed to the weight. It was oddly disconcerting to feel somehow lighter, and the knowledge that any enemy I might face was likely to be in a similar state wasn't great comfort.

I scanned the crowd as we stood in the doorway of the *Home*. It was a typical spacer bar, with the usual scattering of independent and corporate freighterjocks, merchants, cargo bums and drifters. There were some Tahni mixed in with the humans, which Kara had told me was common closer to Earth. The more remote colonies still resented them for the damage done in the war. No prostitutes here---we'd purposely chosen one of the bars farther toward the center of the station, away from the more touristy areas, with their casinos and sex shops.

We moved on inside, not bothering to look for our contact---he or she wouldn't be here for another half-hour. We just found a table, sat and signaled for drinks. We'd popped out of T-space at the edge of this system nearly twenty-four hours ago, used fake ID codes to signal the Instel comsat and relay a recorded message to General Murdock's office. Since we obviously couldn't send a message like that in the

clear, I'd used the private code the 'Boys had come up with during the war to use when we didn't want the brass listening in. Supposedly, "the brass" included then-Colonel Murdock, but I think we all knew he could break it if he wanted to.

We'd asked the General to send someone he trusted to meet with us, detailing the time and the place, then used Deke's highly illegal equipment to change the *Dutchman's* registration, and cruised in. I think I was more than half afraid we'd find a squadron of Patrol cutters waiting for us, but things had gone smoothly, except for the incident with station security. Maybe if we'd offered them a larger bribe...

I looked from Kara to Deke and back again. They hadn't said more than two words to each other since we'd left the Predecessor outpost, and I can't say I'd encouraged them. I wasn't sure if I was genuinely suspicious of Deke, or if it was just the tension showing through, but it was something of a relief to have Kara to act out my paranoia without making me the bad guy.

"Who do you think he'll send?" Deke asked me in hushed tones, glancing around self-consciously.

"Someone we'd recognize," I guessed. "Who we'd feel like we could trust." I shrugged. "Some of us didn't leave the military."

I left it at that, as the service dolly rolled up with our drinks. Deke slipped it a credit spike and it released our glasses from its holders. As it rolled away, I ran an active and passive scan of the bar, searching for hidden weaponry or security monitors, but found only a single video pickup behind the bar.

Not much had changed from the time Kara had been here, years ago---it was almost as wide open as it had been during the war. There would probably be DSI or Patrol undercover agents sprinkled through the rocks, according to what Kara had told us, but even if one saw us and happened to recognize us, he or she would be so far from any kind of backup that we would have met with our contact and left before we'd be in any real danger.

I sipped my Margarita and eyed the crowd, hoping that whoever showed up would be on time...hoping that someone would show up at all. I didn't want to think about what we would do if the Colonel...I mean, the General...wouldn't help us. Things were just too big for us to go on alone, and, as I'd told Deke, there was nowhere in the Commonwealth that we could hide for long.

I chuckled mirthlessly to myself. Maybe I could get Rachel and Pete and we could try to find the Northwest Passage, leave the Cluster. Or we could just head out on impellers, in suspension. It would only take us a couple hundred years to reach the nearest habitable off the Transition Lines catalogued by the big telescopes on the frontier. Hell, Pete could bring his latest girlfriend and we could found our own colony.

But even that fantasy was unfeasible. If the Corporates had control of the Predecessor technology, they'd probably find a new method of interstellar travel and spread their influence a lot farther than we could possibly run. This could only end with the Corporates' defeat or our deaths.

I took a second to wonder why this had happened to me. It was

something I hadn't really considered up till now---there'd been less philosophical things to worry about---but it was a worthy question. I'd long ago given up my nurtured beliefs in a puppet-master God that planned out every step of our lives, and the war had destroyed any image of a benevolent deity interested in the welfare of mankind.

So what did I believe? A universe birthed in blind chance and ruled by chaos? That idea had gone in and out of vogue in scientific and philosophical circles several times in the last few centuries, but I found it unlikely. Some kind of universal mind made up of all the life forces of every creature in the universe, perhaps? Seemed a bit impersonal, given the ironic twists of which life was full.

Maybe it was some kind of karmic wheel of fate---a cosmic version of "what comes around goes around." If so, I must have built up a lot of bad karma in another incarnation, 'cause I'd been dropped into the biggest war in human history at the tender age of twenty-one, and now I was embroiled in some kind of grand conspiracy on an interstellar scale. Maybe fate just has a way of putting the right people in the right place to achieve what needs to be done.

Or maybe, I sighed, gulping down a swallow of alcohol, there was no way to know and I should concentrate on surviving. I could always become a priest when I retired.

A movement from the bar entrance caught my eye, and I glanced around, trying to look casual. Stepping into the establishment was a tall man with a face that spoke of distinction and nobility, and skin the color of carbon graphite. He was powerfully built, but the rangy lines of his two-meter frame and the loose, baggy-sleeved grey

garment he wore concealed his true strength. I tried not to look into his eyes, not wanting to be too obvious, but they drew my gaze to them, as they always had in the 'Boys. They were swirling singularities; black diamonds that crowned a distinguished, regal face fit for the ruler of a nation.

Mat M'voba was the oldest son of Secretary Charles M'voba, leader of the Organization of African States, the second-largest collection of affiliated nations on Earth. He was being groomed to follow in his father's footsteps when the war broke out, and he had shocked his family by volunteering for the Commonwealth Service Academy. Then, on a fateful day in 2,198, he had officially "died" in the Tahni attack on the training vessel *Thatcher*, during the confusion of the Battle for Mars, and he had volunteered once again, along with the other student survivors, to become the core of Special Operations Group *Omega*. Mat had been our field commander, second to Colonel Murdock, and I'd always wondered how he could be so much more mature than the rest of us at nearly the same age. Of late, I had heard that he was General Murdock's aide-de-camp.

Mat glanced carefully around the bar before walking casually up to our table.

"This seat taken?" he rumbled like faraway thunder with a voice so deep into bass that I felt it in my chest.

Deke waved at the table's one vacant chair. "Be our guest, bud."

"Nice to see you fellows again," Mat said, nodding to Deke and I as he sat down.

"Nice to be seen," I returned, not in the least sarcastic.



He stared unabashed at Kara. "Interesting company you're keeping."

"Maybe we should go someplace private," Deke suggested, "and explain our situation."

"Don't take this personally," Mat said, shaking his head, the braided dreadlocks whipping gently back and forth, "but none of us is leaving this table until I'm satisfied that all three of you aren't the traitors, thieves and murderers everyone in my neck of the woods thinks you are."

He didn't say another word, but we understood the unspoken implication that, if he was unsatisfied with our explanation, the three of us wouldn't *ever* be leaving this table.

"All right," I acceded. "It'd probably be easier and faster if I just dumped it to your headcomp."

He nodded silently, and I downloaded the last few weeks of my memory, transmitting it through my neurolink to Mat's RAM. I saw his eyes glaze over for a moment as he assimilated the data. When he focused back in on me, a kind of a sad frown settled in on his face, and I thought for a horrible minute that he had decided our actions--- that *my* actions hadn't been justified. But then he sighed, nodding almost imperceptibly.

"What's happened to you," he said, "fits in with what we know."

"Just what the fuck *is* going on, Mat?" I wanted to know. "We've been working pretty much in the dark."

Mat seemed to consider it, eyes flicking from side to side, obviously wondering if he should say anything here.

"I suppose," he finally decided, "that I wouldn't be telling them anything they didn't already know." I didn't bother to ask who "they" were. "We should start with a little history lesson. You've probably heard some of this in school, but the rest isn't so widely known. When the old Republic discovered the wormhole jumpgate in the Solar asteroid belt back in the mid-Twenty-First Century, unified government was a new thing, forced on the nations of Earth by the devastation of the Sino-Russian War. The countries of Earth only cooperated because they were forced to by the situation, and by the current President of the United States, which was the only nation not directly effected by the radioactive fallout.

"A result of this was, when we encountered the Tahni, who had been politically and economically united for the last two centuries, we were at a distinct disadvantage. By the end of the war---actually that's a bit misleading, since the war never really ended---the Republic had turned into the Commonwealth, and the industrial giants of that day had merged to better supply the military buildup during the period between the two wars. That, as you know all too well, was the origin of the Corporate Council.

"They were given exemption from the current antitrust laws, and the different regulatory agencies were instructed to be extremely lenient with any safety or pollution control violations they discovered---after all, we were at war. The Corporate Council Executive, not being ignorant and certainly not lacking in ambition, made the most of this situation, using their special position to seize control of most non-defense related industries. They also cultivated a

close relationship with the newly-formed Department of Security and Intelligence," he shot a glance Kara's way, "and became involved with many top-secret government research projects---including the one that led to our creation, by the way.

"It seemed a perfect set of circumstances for the Council. With the wormholes' positions known and easily defensible, the cold war between the Commonwealth and the entrenched Tahni Empire could have dragged on forever, with the Council's power constantly growing. But then Teller and Fox discovered the warp effect, and the Transition drive threw a huge monkey wrench into the works. Carefully cultivated borders fell apart overnight, and almost anyone who could afford a fusion reactor could begin privately colonizing any world in the Cluster---including those claimed by the Tahni.

"The Tahni, quite naturally, didn't like this and bombed quite a few of these 'squatter colonies' to vapors, sparking the outbreak of the Second War. This one didn't end in a truce, however. The Tahni Empire was overthrown, and the Corporate Council was suddenly left without an enemy to justify their existence. In the last ten years, there've been no less than fifteen separate pieces of legislation introduced to take away the Council's antitrust exemption. Three of them have been passed by the Senate, but President Jameson is in the pocket of the Corporates, and he's vetoed all of them.

"I don't know if any of you've bothered to register, but there's a Presidential election at the end of this year, and it's nearly a sure thing that Jameson's going to lose. There's a lot of populist opposition to the Council, because of their abuses of colonial sovereignty---and don't

think they can't read the handwriting on the wall." He smiled coldly. "They've tried various political dirty tricks to fix the election, but the military top brass is tired of the Council's interference and we've been keeping them in check. But in the past year, they've been way too quiet, and we've suspected they've been up to something. Maybe now we have a better idea of what it is." He took a deep breath, settling back in his chair with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Well," Deke prompted, "don't keep us in suspense---what are the bastards planning?"

"And what does it have to do with...what I found?" Kara put in.

"Not now," Mat said, still staring distracted into space. "I need to contact the General. He'll want to talk to you himself." He looked back at us. "Meet me at the entrance to the public docking bay in three hours." He stood abruptly, turned on his heel and left the bar without further comment.

We sat in surprised silence, just looking at each other and glancing at the direction M'voba had walked off to.

"Well, Mat's as stiff as he ever was," Deke said, breaking the silence. "Fucker always had a ramrod up his ass."

"He's been in the military a long time," I mused. "Must be a Colonel by now, I'd guess."

"That was *the* Mat M'voba?" Kara asked in a hushed tone, a hint of awe in her voice.

"The one and only," I replied.

"My God." She sat back in her chair, eyes wide. "He's a legend in the DSI---my boss used to say that Mat M'voba was the biggest pain in

the ass since they cured hemorrhoids."

Deke, who had been in the middle of taking a drink, sprayed a mouthful of alcohol halfway across the table as he sputtered with uncontrolled laughter.

"Easy," I cautioned him, trying not to bust up myself.

Kara tossed down the swallow that remained in her glass. "So, what are we going to do for the next three hours? Sit here and get shitfaced?"

Deke wiped a few drops of liquid off his chin, still chuckling quietly. "Well, as appealing as that sounds, I feel like doing a little gambling." He rose from his chair, tugging the bottom of his jacket down. "I'm heading to the casino---I'll see you in three at the docks."

"Be careful." I tossed him an offhanded salute as he started to walk away.

"Kara shot me a grin. "Just you and me. Three hours---time enough to have a little fun, if you've changed your mind."

I smiled, rising from my chair. "Thanks, but how about finding some real food? I've had enough reprocessed shipboard shit to last me a century."

She stood, taking my proffered arm. "You know, that sounds almost as good as sex."

A quick interrogation of one of the bar's human employees gave us the name and location of the lone restaurant on Belial that served real meat. In stations such as this, and on more crowded worlds, beef was a luxury; but after growing up on an agro colony, I wasn't quite ready to give it up for soy products. The place was halfway around the

curve of the side wall and toward the docking bay, which amounted to about a kilometer's walk through the most built-up areas on Belial.

I have to admit, even with everything else we had to think about, I couldn't help but be fascinated by the sights that greeted me at every corner of the pleasure station. Never had I seen such a monument to the varied lusts and perversities of humanity, not even on Thunderhead. Of course, being raised by the Church of Canaan may have colored my opinion, but all I could think as we passed ViR sex parlors, pleasure-doll rental shops, Kickshops, etc., was that mankind had reached the stars, had achieved such a level of technological sophistication that we were able to manipulate the very fabric of space itself, but we still clung to the same toys, the same kind of vices that the race had embraced since its inception. Oh, the way we indulged them was more sophisticated, with fewer dangers, but the motivations were the same: a desire to escape reality, a desire to avoid paying the price for pleasure that made it worth having.

We wanted sexual pleasure without the commitment, even the commitment to have to deal with a real person, and without the spiritual closeness that made the whole process worthwhile. We wanted the feeling of well-being and invulnerability that drugs and illegal ViR brought without the actual accomplishment and joy that brought those feelings naturally. We wanted to have our cake and eat it, too, like humans always have. I wondered if we'd ever change.

The lines of demarcation between the sectors of the station were well-defined by a series of "no-man's-lands"---long, maintenance access corridors lined with storage bins, vats of chemicals and locked access

hatches down into the lower-level maintenance shops. The crowd began to thin as we approached the corridor, and by the time we entered it, there was only one person behind us, hanging back far enough that I didn't think to be nervous about it.

"So," Kara was asking me, still holding my arm, "what was the real Mat M'voba like to serve with?"

"Mat was the only one of us who didn't seem too effected by the implant treatments," I told her, remembering an image of him in an immaculate cadet uniform back in the Academy. "He knew exactly why he was in the military, and everything he did was ordered around that. He was a soldier because he felt he owed a debt to the Commonwealth, and he felt that he needed to pay that debt in full before he could follow in his father's footsteps.

"He was always the consummate professional. Whether he was going to be a bridge officer on a cruiser or a commando humping through a swamp on some nowhere outpost, he was going to do his duty. He held us together through some rough times, times when we were ready to kill each other."

"Sometimes," Kara mused, "I thought that war would never end. It seemed like..." She trailed off, frowning as her gaze settled on something to our front. Looking up, I saw a pair of tall, long-coated figures approaching us through the corridor.

"What?" I asked, disengaging my arm from hers.

She glanced behind us before answering.

"There's one in back of us and two in front of us," she said tightly, still walking, slipping the pair of monomolecular-edged daggers out of

their sheaths under her jacket. She held the blades with their non-sharpened sides back, concealed by her forearms. "They're DSI Cadre---I can tell from the thermal signature."

I nodded, not letting my expression change, unobtrusively palming my vibroshiv. I took my first good look at the two approaching from the front, still about twenty-five meters away. They were both tall and lanky, with the look of men born in a gravity field of no more than three-quarters Earth standard, but I could see the bulge of corded muscles through their coat sleeves. One was bare-faced, with long, dark hair pulled back into a pony tail, while the other was bearded with a brown Mohawk. I audited my memory of the glance I'd spared the one behind us, noting that she was a female, shorter than her fellows and dressed in spacer's jacket and boots, her blond hair cut short.

"We're going forward," I said. "You take the one on the left." I didn't wait for an answer---there was no more time for talking.

I could hear the adrenaline-laced blood pumping in my veins, feel the surge of natural and artificial stimulants and the rush of extra oxygen being forced into my bloodstream as my headcomp put me into combat mode and the Machine took over. I went from a walking gait to a forty-kilometer-an-hour sprint in a fraction of a second, rushing at my chosen opponent with Kara beside me.

In the scant moments before I reached him, my headcomp went over everything I knew about DSI Cadre---and it wasn't good. They carried extensive augmentation, though not as elaborate or sophisticated as mine, with bionic weapon mounts in both hands and



sometimes their feet as well. They wouldn't have lasers because of station customs, so I assumed some sort of blade.

I got about four meters from my target before I left the ground, leaping from a brisk walk into a flying side kick. He dodged out of the way like I knew he would, and tried to come in at me as I landed. I hit on the ball of my right foot, spinning into a back kick that caught him in the chest. It was little more than a glancing blow, but it knocked him back a good two meters, and gave me the second I needed to look to my left at where Kara was engaged with the other Cadre commando, her knives tangled with the seven-centimeter claws that had extended from the tips of his fingers.

My vibroshiv wasn't meant for throwing, and couldn't be tossed with any accuracy while activated, but I had done this before. I cut the knife's power and, with a flick of my wrist, sent the deactivated blade flying straight at the head of Kara's opponent. Only a conventional knife without the vibration that turned it into a deadly cutting machine, it was still sufficient to bury itself up to the hilt in the commando's left eye.

I didn't pause to see the effects of my handiwork, just turned my attention back to my own adversary, extending my talons to meet the rush of his finger claws. We were a whirlwind of slashing blades and clashing ceramic, our hands moving so fast I'm not sure that it would have been visible to the unaugmented eye, and our feet doing a high-stepping dance as each of us tried to trip up the other, or get into position for a kick.

Dull-grey ceramic claws passed centimeters from my face, hunting

my eyes as I bobbed in rhythm with the swings, and I felt the warm spray of blood on my face---I caught a vague indication from my battlecomp that I had taken slashing wounds in my arm and chest, but my endorphin high masked the pain. I was more clearly focused on my opponent's blood, splattered across the front of his jacket from a pair of deep slashes in both sides of his chest that had penetrated his subdermal armor. The Killing Machine rumbled deep in my chest, feeding on the sight like a shark smelling blood in the water, and I felt a savage thrill course through me, while at the same time the reasoning part of me withdrew to watch the Machine take over.

We danced backward, my implant sensors and sonar keeping a careful watch on the storage bins behind me as I warded off my opponent's relentless attack, all the while my battlecomp analyzing the fight to provide me with a strategy. My main advantage was my superior strength. I had the muscles of my homeworld, plus the flexor fibers the Commonwealth had given me, while he had bionic servos in all of his major joints. They gave him great strength within a limited range of motion, mostly straight lines and up-and-down arcs, while my augments gave me full strength on an almost unlimited range of movement. I had to find a way to take advantage of that.

I sensed a shoulder-high storage bin coming behind me, and the Machine made a decision that the reasoning Cal Mitchell probably wouldn't have, took a risk and flipped backward onto it. The world spun around me and I caught a freeze-frame of Kara engaging the female DSI agent, the one I had knifed lay face-down in a pool of blood at their feet. My opponent leaped after me, his eyes cold and

business-like, and I ducked under his flying body, slashing across his belly with my talons.

Blood flew from the wounds as he slammed into the wall, and I jumped into a roundhouse kick that caught him between the shoulder blades. He jerked with the impact of the blow, but his pain receptors, like mine, were clouded by a haze of endorphines and adrenaline, and he was back on his guard before I could follow up the kick. I screamed at the Machine, and finally it listened, realizing that those kinds of attacks would buy me time, but do little towards putting him away. I had to catch him where he was vulnerable.

I threw myself off the storage bin headfirst, twisting in midair to land on my feet and retracting my talons. He was on top of me in a heartbeat, trying to press me and not give me the chance to get away. I twisted away from his center of mass, darted a hand forward between his legs and caught him in mid-leap...by his testicles. The Machine cackled ghoulishly in my ear as I grabbed a good handful, swung him around by the organs, getting my hand into position before I re-extended my implant blades.

The talons sliced through the fabric of his trousers and the skin just above his balls, snipping them off neatly just as his penis was yanked off in my grasp. There was a spray of bright-red blood that even his intricate damage-control systems couldn't hope to quench and he went flying directly towards the female DSI commando, whose back was to us.

She sensed the flying body and moved to duck away from it, leaving her open to Kara's attack. I hardly saw Kara move, but

suddenly a broad-bladed combat knife was buried in her opponent's left ear. The DSI attacker jerked like a pleasure doll with a burned-out control board and slumped to the ground, suddenly motionless.

The one I had castrated was writhing on the ground, moaning softly in psychological shock, hands trying to find his reproductive organ. I suddenly realized I still had it in my hand, dropped it and a handful of bloody cloth and stepped up to the man. The physical pain wouldn't come for him until his pharmacy organ ran out of endorphines, and even then it would be damped by his headcomp, but he was fucked and he knew it. If someone didn't get him to an automed soon, he'd bleed to death in minutes.

He looked up at me with a glazed expression, fighting to lever himself to his feet, claws still out on his right hand. Leaning over the body of the female DSI agent, I pulled the combat knife out of her brain with a messy splatter of blood, bone and chips of ceramic. The living commando had propped himself up on one knee and one hand, trying to get up for one last strike at me.

*Kill him!* The Machine screamed. For once, I agreed. I slammed the knife into the socket of his one organic eye, through to the cerebral tissue beneath it.

His arms groped nervelessly for a second, then he went limp, held upright only by the knife in my hand. I planted a boot on his shoulder and shoved him backwards, freeing the blade. His corpse smacked the ground with a soft, wet sound. With an orgasmic thrill, the Killer sighed within me and retreated back to the darkness of my soul. I nearly collapsed with the suddenness of its departure, had to catch

myself on the storage bin before I keeled over.

Taking a deep breath, I staggered over to Kara. Her jacket was ripped to shreds, and soaked with blood from a dozen cuts, but it didn't appear that any of them were serious. A slice on her chin had laid bare a tiny patch of grey duraweave subdermal armor beneath the skin. We stood there for just a moment, looking at each other, just trying to catch our breaths.

"You look like shit," I told her in a hoarse voice, handing the knife back to her hilt-first.

"You don't look so good yourself, soldier." She smiled grimly, sheathing the weapon. Her eyes went to the corpse of the one I had de-testicled. "Interesting strategy," she commented.

"A shot to the nads," I reflected, trying to wipe bloody hands on bloody shirt. "How the hell could they have found us so quick?"

Her head jerked up, a tense frown tightening her features.

"Maybe," she said, "they weren't following *us*."

"Mat." I immediately realized what she meant.

Without another word, I took off down the corridor at a dead sprint.

## Interlude: Trint

The stealth with which the big Tahni hugged the shadows belied his considerable bulk, but this was the job he had been created for. He had not attempted to follow his quarry directly---Trint had quite the unique thermal signature, which would have alerted the man had he but done a general sensor sweep.

Instead, he had followed the StarFleet officer, Mat M'voba. He had known of the human, even before his association with Damiani, through files audited during the Great Tragedy that the humans called the Second Interstellar War. He had known that the man he had come to observe would find M'voba.

The StarFleet officer had met with the other humans for a few minutes, but Trint had not been able to get close enough to observe what had occurred...there had been Tahni in the bar, and they would have known Trint for what he was at but a glance. Also, the man he had come to watch was too close, and might have detected him.

He had picked M'voba up again in one of the corridors heading back to the docking bay, following him from a safe distance of fifty meters. Trint watched the human with a growing sense of respect. He carried himself like a warrior should, with pride in his gait and readiness screaming from every fiber of his being. Truly he would have been a worthy adversary to face in the battle pits back in the palace. Instead, he was destined to be ambushed and killed by one who had been his comrade-in-arms. It was not a fitting way for a

warrior to die.

Trint watched carefully for the sign of M'voba's betrayer, but he had not shown himself by the time they had reached the lift banks at the far end of the station, and the Tahni was beginning to wonder if he hadn't miscalculated. That was when he saw them. Had he not known what to look for, he would never have noticed the thermal signature of the three humans that surreptitiously attempted to close in on the StarFleet officer from different directions. But these operatives had also been included in his tactical briefings in his time with the Empire: they were from the deep-cover commando branch of the Commonwealth's Department of Security and Intelligence, the Cadre.

Trint's capacity for emotion, like that of all of his kind, had been underestimated by his designers, and what anger he could muster flared suddenly. Was this not the ultimate dishonor, to use stooges to fight your battle rather than confront a foe yourself? He very nearly gave into an urge to go forward and aid the officer, but only curiosity stopped him---he wished mightily to see how M'voba handled himself.

So he waited at his hiding place in a shadowed alcove and watched the Cadre agents close in. They intercepted him just before he reached the lift banks, one attempting to focus his attention to the front while the other two came in at angles from behind. M'voba wasn't fooled; he flipped backwards into a defensive posture that let him see all three of them, extending his talons to meet their claws.

They came in at once with a blur of motion, a deadly ballet of sweeping blades that reminded Trint of the zero-gravity performance

Damiani had dismissed so lightly. Blood flew in crimson handfuls as those implant blades struck home, and much of it belonged to the DSI Cadre, but enough was that of the big StarFleet officer for Trint to realize that the big man could not win. Civilians around the spectacle began to flee, though not in a panic---Belial was a rough place, and this sort of thing wasn't entirely unusual. Within a minute, the entire area was clear, but for the combatants and Trint.

It was a wonder that the fight lasted through that minute, with the hardwired speed of its participants. Messages travelled along superconductive threads connected to implant battlecomps, guiding flexor fibers or bionic servos at speeds a human nervous system couldn't hope to match. M'voba and the Cadre agents went through a half-dozen moves and counters in a second, just blurs moving through the empty street in front of the lift banks, leaving trails of blood in their wake.

Without warning, two of the blurs momentarily materialized into the big StarFleet officer, soaked and dripping with sanguine life, connected by his outstretched talon to the left eye of one of the DSI Cadre. The image lasted only a fraction of an eyeblink, then the agent's corpse collapsed to the ground and M'voba's figure blended back into the fray.

*Lord Emperor*, Trint swore to himself, nearly whispering it aloud. What warriors these humans of *Omega* group were! Small wonder the common Tahni soldiery had thought them the *Tahn-Skii'ana*, the very spirits of death.

A scissor-kick backed both of the remaining DSI agents away long



enough for M'voba to get a breath, and he used the respite to lunge at a maintenance cart loaded down with tools. The nearest of the Cadre sprang at him, but it was too late---M'voba came around with an industrial vibrocutter that sliced through the top of the agent's skull, buried itself somewhere around his breastbone and stuck fast.

The Fleet officer tried to let go of the impromptu weapon, but the final DSI cadreman was on him. The agent had produced a monowire whip---a spool of line only a molecule in width and weighted at one end---that he had been unable to use before due to the proximity of his fellows; and, while M'voba was distracted, he wrapped the meter-long strand of wire around the big man's neck and pulled it tight.

Now Trint knew he could not stand by and let this man be assassinated by his lessers. He had been sent to ensure that the woman, McIntire, was dealt with; and perhaps, to prolong his existence, he might stand by at her death. But he knew that whatever purpose there was to killing M'voba, it was not necessarily that of Andre Damiani.

Trint prepared himself to rush in and aid the Fleet officer, regardless of the consequences; but in the eyeblink between making this decision and carrying it out, something streaked out from an open liftcar and slammed into the DSI agent in a tornado of taloned fists. The cadreman went down in heartbeats, an ultrasharp implant blade buried in his brain through the right ear, and the blur materialized into...Andre Damiani's Chief of Security.

Trint allowed himself a breath of surprise, but could not afford the luxury of remaining to ponder the reasoning behind the man's

action...if he stayed in the area any longer, he would surely be detected. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head, the Tahni fled down the corridor.

There were mysteries here that could not be solved today.

## Chapter Ten

I tried to contact Mat over the neurolink as we ran, but received no answer, so I called Deke and told him to meet us at the docking bay, then tried to tap into the station's security system. *That* was met with a polite rebuff by the Netdogs, the automatic safeguards, which were much more sophisticated than I thought likely on a place like this.

By the time they'd finished warning me that any further attempts would result in my ejection from the station, we reached the lift banks---and came to an abrupt halt. Blood and carnage was everywhere, but I'd grown used to that. There were four bodies littering the ground in front of the lift station, but the only one that concerned me was the one laying face-down in a pool of bright, arterial life. While Kara kept watch, I ran over to Mat's side, nearly slipping in the liquid around him. There was a monowire whip lying next to his shoulder, and the matching wound around his neck was only now beginning to be filled by his byomer subdermal armor.

That was the difference between the DSI goons and us: their duraweave protection was not complete, as I had demonstrated, due to the details of the process by which it was installed. A new Cadre agent was anesthetized, and the outer layer of skin over their torsos and limbs was burned away by a laser. The duraweave was laid over the exposed areas, which were then covered by cloned skin tissue. This left the face and groin unprotected, which was unavoidable because the process of removing the skin from those areas would have

been too dangerous and expensive.

The 'Boys, being a bit more elite and much more expensive, were injected with electrically-active byomer, which was then guided around the body under the skin by electromagnets. Byomer---a lab-grown virus infused with a polymer structure that could be selectively hardened through the use of pulsed electric currents---had several advantages over crystalline duraweave, the foremost of which was that it could be guided beneath the skin to safely protect the entire body. The other, and the one that just might have saved Mat's life, was that it could be connected to our headcomps and the superconductive hardwires that supplemented our nerves to seal wounds by coming back together after it was sliced.

I didn't know how he managed to kill the agent who'd used the whip on him or pull the weapon off of his neck before he'd collapsed, but a quick contact with his headcomp's medical monitors told me he was still alive. I let out the breath I'd been holding, the sick feeling in my stomach finally beginning to die down. If the wounds hadn't killed him outright, I knew he could survive.

I gently turned him over, noting the score of slashes across his arms and chest. None of them was anywhere near as serious, however, as the wound that went all the way around his neck. With all the blood and oozing byomer, I couldn't tell if the artery had been completely sealed, or if the trachea had been injured, but I knew he needed some serious medical attention, and quick, if he was going to survive this.

"He's still alive," I told Kara, coming up into a crouch and throwing

Mat over my shoulder. "We've got to get him to an automed and the closest one's in the *Dutchman*."

No. The transmission was so weak, it took me a moment to realize that it was from Mat. *No...take me to my ship...Ismael. Have to call the General.*

"All right," I whispered to him, earning a puzzled look from Kara. "We're going to Mat's ship," I told her. "Follow me."

Mat's blood soaked into my jacket as I ran him to the lift bank, a warm, sticky feeling spreading across my shoulders. So great was my relief that the one hope we had of getting some help hadn't been cut off, I hadn't thought to argue with him, even though the *Dutchman* would have been closer.

I felt vaguely disturbed at myself that I was more concerned with the help Mat represented than with his survival as a human being, but seeing Rachel broken and still in that automed had gone a long way toward inuring me to the suffering of others. Until I saw her whole and safe again, my gentler emotions were in stasis, suspended in a frozen solution of fear, hate and desperation, slaves to the Machine.

We were given a wide berth by the tourists and security alike as we disembarked from our liftcar, using handholds to pull ourselves along in the zero-gravity of the docking bay. If there were any more of the DSI Cadre waiting for us, we'd be pretty well fucked without Deke around to help, but we hadn't had the luxury of waiting for him. Hopefully, he could catch up with us---hopefully, there wasn't a separate trap laying for him somewhere along the way.

I left it to Kara to watch our backs, devoting my attention to

finding the *Ismael*. The docking bay on Belial was similar to the one on the CSF station back home---which is to say, it was similar to most docking bays on most space stations---but much larger. The evacuated portion that was open to space was separated from the rest of the bay by a wall of thick transplas, and the ships' airlocks were accessible by retractable docking umbilicals.

The *Ismael*, I discovered, was a star courier similar to the one we'd stolen from the late Trina Wellesley, tucked innocuously between an interplanetary shuttle and a personal runabout that had obviously come from somewhere else in the Centauri Belt. I wondered, as we approached down the umbilical, just how we'd get into the airlock with Mat unconscious, but the outer hatch popped open seemingly of its own accord as we floated toward it. I assumed that Mat had either come back to himself enough to open it or had sent it a signal earlier, when he'd made neural contact with me.

I carried him aboard, the surroundings of the courier familiar from our time on the *Hecate*, easily found the coffin-like automed and let Mat float next to me while I opened the lid.

*Wait.* I heard Mat's weak transmission again. *Use the commo board---coordinates are preset. The General has to know.*

"I will," I promised him, maneuvering him into the unit. "You just take it easy, Mat. Everything'll be okay."

I shut the lid, hit the controls to activate the diagnostic AI, and breathed a sigh of relief. He'd be okay now. The machine could replace his blood and repair what wounds were too large for his medical nano. If his trachea had been too badly damaged, he might

need some further treatment, but he would live.

"How is he?" Kara asked me, dogging the hatch shut.

"He'll make it." I kicked back up toward the cockpit. "Right now, we need to make a call."

"I wonder what's taking Deke so long," I heard her ask quietly behind me as I slowly floated forward.

"He'll be here," I sighed, having to remind myself that I'd *asked* her to keep an eye on him. "Why don't you keep an eye on the medical monitors and let me know Mat's condition as soon as the diagnostics come up?" Then I was through the corridor and in the pit, leaving her back in the equipment bay.

The commo board, as Mat had told me, was pre-aligned for a laser line-of-sight transmission to a certain set of coordinates---right here in the Centauri Belt, less than twenty-thousand clicks away. I blinked in surprise. General Murdock was somewhere in system, a chance I didn't believe he would be prepared to take. He must have been very concerned with what we had to say. I activated the board, sent out the preprogrammed contact signal and anchored myself on the seatback, waiting for a reply. My combat high had started to die down, and I was beginning to feel the stinging, itching burn of my various cuts. Blood had matted the hair under my arms, and it hurt like hell to move, but I was hard-pressed not to scratch my many itches.

Mercifully, it wasn't but ten seconds before a shimmering hologram coalesced above the commo board, slowly becoming a face. The face itself, and the body I knew to be connected to it, weren't too

prepossessing for arguably the single most powerful man in the Commonwealth military. Chiefs of Staff came and went with the whims of politics, but General Antonin Murdock was a monolithic fixture in StarFleet Intelligence. He knew where the bodies were buried because he'd buried most of them.

But to look at him, you'd think he was an accountant. I remember the first time I'd seen him, when he'd come into the medical bay of the cruiser *Patton*, after it had picked up the survivors of the *Thatcher*. I'd thought he was one of the ship's medics. He had this pale, thin face, with ears and nose that belonged on someone ten centimeters taller and twenty kilos heavier, only further accented by the buzz cut of his dark brown hair. I did notice his gentle eyes, so soft and brown you'd think he was about to break into tears.

It was all a superb camouflage job, a natural chameleon suit that hid the most efficient, creative and dangerous man I'd ever known. Over twenty years ago, before the Second War had even broken out, he'd analyzed the effects of the Transition drive on warfare and determined the need for the Glory Boys. He'd bided his time, marshaled his resources and cultivated his favors, until the time came that a cadet training ship was caught up in the Battle for Mars. Out of three hundred of us on that ship, only a dozen had survived to accept Murdock's offer to undergo the augmentation process and become the most elite commando group in human history. Of that dozen, only seven of us had lived through the war.

There had been some days that I'd hated the Colonel so badly I'd wanted to rip his guts out with my talons, and I'm sure I wasn't the



only one that had felt that way. Yet as I faced his image there on the courier, all I could think of was the way he'd covered my ass when I came back from Canaan. Despite the positive results of my little escapade, I could very easily have been court-martialed and executed for desertion, not to mention disobeying orders and stealing a multimillion credit starship. But he'd called in his old debts, and somehow a set of orders had appeared, back-dated to the time I'd left, authorizing me to set up a civilian resistance on Canaan.

He didn't have to do that.

"It's been a long time, Mitchell," he said in that incongruously gentle voice, not showing any surprise he might have had that I was the one calling him.

"I wish it were under better circumstances, sir. I'm afraid there's been some trouble. We were attacked---Mat's been hurt, but he'll be all right. He'll be in the automed for a while, but he wanted me to contact you immediately."

"I was afraid something like this might happen." Murdock shook his head sadly. "It's alarming they'd have the nerve to so openly attack one of ours."

"I'm not completely certain they're through yet," I admitted. "We still haven't heard from Deke. I think it would be wise if we met with you personally as soon as possible."

"Take the courier to these coordinates." He rattled off the numbers. "Wait there. As soon as we think it's safe, we'll meet you." He didn't wait for a reply, just signed off, and the hologram abruptly faded.

I shut down the board, frowning. I don't think he fully trusted me, but there wasn't a lot I could do about it. Hopefully, he'd give us a chance to talk before he opened fire. Sighing with a deep sense of impotence, I pushed off back toward the equipment bay. We had to try to find Deke...

I knew something was wrong even before I emerged from the corridor. There were too many heartbeats and too much heat emanating from the bay---enough for at least three people. I tried to pull myself to a halt, extending my talons and dragging them against the bulkhead, but it was already too late; my momentum had carried me to the end of the short corridor.

Whatever I'd expected to see there, the scene that unfolded before me was not it. Deke and Kara were there, and seemingly unharmed, but the focus of my attention was the huge handgun pointed in our general direction and the big man holding it. I recognized both, and both for their distinctiveness.

The gun was an anachronism, much like the man that held it. Big and bulky, it was still light for its size, since it was merely the launching platform for miniature, gyrostabilized rocket rounds. The weapon had been introduced more than a hundred and fifty years ago, and had long ago been made obsolete by pulse lasers and Gauss guns, but its versatility and the introduction of modern, high-tech, armor-piercing rounds made the rocket pistol a popular choice among special ops units during the war.

It had rode low at the side of this man for all of the six years we'd served together, and had seemed to be as much a part of him as his

lantern jaw and gunmetal grey eyes. He was an imposing figure at just under a full two meters---of course, to a heavy-g shorty like myself, everyone over a meter-eight is imposing---with a broad upper body narrowing at the waist. His brown hair was cut short and spiky in front, but travelled down his neck into a rat-tail, an affectation he'd adapted since the war, and the well-trimmed mustache I remembered had grown into a bushy handlebar that drooped down past his chin.

The last time I'd seen him he'd been wearing StarFleet utilities that clashed starkly with the black leathers he wore now, but there was no mistaking who the man was. His name was Roger West, Major, Commonwealth StarFleet, retired; but we'd always known him as Cowboy. What the hell he was doing here now, pointing that big hogleg at us, I had no idea.

"Howdy, Cal," he drawled, throwing me a two-fingered salute. "How's life treating ya'?"

"Better all the time, Cowboy," I said, retracting my talons and trying to keep calm. I glanced at his gun, shaking my head in disgust. "I knew I should have tried to bribe those damned customs officers."

"I ran into old Rog on the way here," Deke spoke up. "He expressed an interest in speaking to you."

"For a man who spent the last ten years on one backwater colony," Kara commented, "you sure run into old friends in the oddest places."

Friends...that might be too strong a word for my relationship with Cowboy; comrades-in-arms, yes, but never really friends. I'm not sure if Cowboy ever let any of us get close enough to really be his friend.

"What's it going to be, Cowboy?" I asked him after a moment.

"You want to tell us what you want and why you're here, or just shoot us and put us out of our misery?"

"Don't rush the man, Caleb," Deke muttered, glaring at me.

"Y'know, Cal, there's a lot of reasons I looked you fellahs up," Cowboy replied, pulling a cigar out of his jacket pocket and inserting it unlit between his teeth with a dramatic flare. "'Bout two million of 'em, t'be exact."

"Those Corporates sure are generous with their bounty money," Deke reflected, seeming a bit envious.

"So, you do this for a living now?" I asked West, not at all surprised. Professional bounty hunting wasn't uncommon since the war---with the proliferation of personal starships, it had become nearly impossible for the Commonwealth authorities to track down every wanted criminal in the Cluster.

"Mostly," he shrugged. "Not too many jobs out there where a fellah like me can use his experience."

"How did you find us?" Kara demanded.

"I tracked *you*, Captain McIntire, to Canaan," he told her. "After I found out ol' Cal here was involved, I figured he'd wind up trying to contact Murdock eventually. From what I seen back there," he jerked a thumb back in the general direction of the lift banks, "I'm not the only one who followed that line of thinkin'."

"Are you here to take us in, Cowboy?" I cut directly to the chase. "Because if you are, you might as well shoot us now."

West looked me long and hard in the eye, finally sighed, and stuffed his pistol into a holster under his jacket.

"I got t'admit," he said, smiling tightly, "the temptation was there--- hard t'say no t'two million in Corporate scrip. But after what I saw on Canaan," he continued, shaking his head, a dark look passing across his face, "I can't but believe y'all are in the right. I want to help, if y'all will have me."

"I need a drink," Deke let out a deep breath he'd been holding.

"Nice to know we're not on our own anymore..." Kara was saying. But my mind was focused on West's words.

"What do you mean, 'after what you saw on Canaan'?" I asked him, troubled by the phrase.

"Y...you mean y'didn't know?" He frowned deeply. "I'm sorry, Cal...it was the CSF. They found out your wife and brother were at that hospital in the mountains." He hesitated, and it seemed to me that time had stopped and his next words would never come---they were a sword of Damocles hanging eternally above me.

"They destroyed the whole place with assault shuttles, killed everyone there."

I felt like someone had kicked me full-force in the nuts...my breath went out of me, and a strange numbness spread simultaneously through my gut and my head with such speed that I thought I might pass out. My mind drifted in a sea of fog, unable to deal with the concrete reality of what West had told me. I dimly registered Deke and Kara saying something, felt their hands touching my shoulders in comfort, but all I could comprehend---the only thing that penetrated the thick haze around my brain---was a voice as real and present as any of those around me, shouting one accusation over and over inside

my head.

"YOU!" It screamed at me. "They're dead because of YOU!"

I didn't yell, or rage, or scream or even cry---I didn't have the strength for it. I felt like my life force had been drained, and if I had not been in zero gravity, I would have keeled over. I tried to give myself over to the Machine, but the Machine was gone and I was all alone, an embryo adrift in the universe. When I finally spoke, I couldn't trust myself to say anything about it.

"We need to leave here," I said hoarsely. "The General's waiting for us."

"What about our ships---Cowboy's and mine?" Deke asked. I looked at him like he'd spoken to me in some undiscovered alien language and he fell silent, red-faced.

"Leave them here," Kara said. "If things work out with the General, we can come back and get them. If not...well, we probably won't be alive to care."

## Chapter Eleven

I wanted to crawl into a hole and pull it in after me, but I didn't even have that comfort. The flight to the coordinates Murdock had given us was too short for that luxury. Kara and I barely had time to clean ourselves off and use the courier's first-aid supplies to patch each other's more gaping cuts before we arrived at the arranged spot. At least we didn't have to wait long for the General to make an appearance---we hadn't been at the meet point more than ten minutes before his ship cruised in on impellers. I watched the sensors over Deke's shoulder as I pulled on one of the spare flight jackets Kara and I had found in a utility closet---ours had been shredded in the fight.

He came in on a cutter, a ship big enough for the courier to nestle in its small docking bay, and I surmised that was exactly how Mat had come in, in order to throw off anyone who observed him arriving. It was rather ostentatious for a personal transport, but I guess rank hath its privileges. We turned over control of the courier to Murdock's pilot and were guided into the bay, our hatch matching up with the inner airlock.

I viewed it all mechanically, past caring whether or not Murdock would believe or help. I hoped for Kara's sake she could be persuasive, because I didn't think I'd be much help.

Once the airlock had pressurized, our inner hatch swung outward, and a pair of faceless covert ops types glided through, dressed in byomer reflex suits with visored helmets, and toting wicked-looking

electron beamers. They didn't speak to us as they swept through the ship, checking us and everything else for hidden bombs and weapons. One of them confiscated Cowboy's handgun, and I thought for a second from the look on his face that he was going to argue about it, but the heavy weaponry evidently silenced his complaint.

Once they completed their check, one positioned himself just inside the hatch while the other went back through the lock to report. He had been gone for several minutes when we all felt the nauseating jolt of Transition, and slowly began sinking to the deck as artificial gravity cut in. I figured we were heading somewhere at a more comfortable distance from Earth. When the guard returned he was followed by General Murdock.

The Bulldog, that's what they'd called him, though not for his physique, nor for his temperament---indeed he was an incredibly unremarkable specimen in an age where many engineered their bodies to their liking, at only a meter-six and less than eighty kilos; and he had the manners of a professional diplomat. No, he was called the Bulldog, in admiration by his supporters and scorn by his enemies, because once he'd set his teeth into a matter, he would never let go. He'd fought for the creation of Omega Group for nearly five years against ridicule and threats of demotion, but he'd never let the idea go. He was also the Bulldog because larger and more powerful dogs kept jumping into the ring with him and leaving bloodied and beaten.

He moved into the *Ismael's* equipment bay and looked the situation over without so much as a twitch of surprise at Cowboy's presence. He spared me a nod before his eyes settled on Kara.



"You must be the infamous Captain McIntire." He offered her a hand, which she shook uncertainly. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise, sir." She actually seemed respectful. I don't think I'd heard her use a respectful tone since I'd met her.

Murdock motioned to one of the guards and the man stepped sharply forward.

"Have Colonel M'voba transferred to the medical bay," he ordered, then turned to us before the man had a chance to respond. "Let's talk in my situation room." He turned and strode quickly out of the hatch, leaving us scrambling to follow. Above all else, the Bulldog was a man who was used to being obeyed immediately and without question.

\* \* \*

"You do spin quite a yarn," General Murdock commented after Kara, Deke and I laid out our story. "If I was auditing this in a ViRdrama, I'd call it hopelessly unrealistic." At Murdock's words I felt my throat tighten. If he didn't believe us, this was all for nothing.

The General's "situation room" was a large cabin that featured a holographic map of the Cluster hanging in the air over an oval table, inlaid with controls linking it to the ship's mainframe. The crimson threads of the Transition Lines were the web that bound the Cluster together, cutting human/Tahni space off arbitrarily from the rest of the Spiral Arm and the whole of the galaxy through the whims of hyperdimensional physics. What lay beyond that gravitoinertial wall remained as mysterious to us as the depths of the human heart.

Led into the room by armed guards, we'd sat evenly spaced around it, taking our cue from Murdock, and had immediately gone into an almost military briefing, with Kara starting it and Deke and I finishing up. I held my breath as I waited for the General to speak again, waiting for the judgement that could mean our immediate deaths. I didn't particularly care if I died, not with Rachel gone, but I *did* plan on taking quite few of them with me.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "what you've told me fits with our current assessment of the situation."

I heard Kara beside me letting out a breath in relief.

"Just one thing." Murdock raised a finger, turning to Cowboy. "You. You know, Roger," Murdock was the only one involved with the team that didn't use Cowboy's nickname, "I make it a policy to keep an eye on all the surviving teammembers to follow their careers and," he shot Deke a meaningful glance, "to make sure that they don't get into too much trouble. But you---for the last five years, it's as if you don't even exist, like you left the Cluster entirely. How is it that you turn up at such a critical juncture, out of nowhere, as it were?"

"I've been running bounties in the Worlds, General," Cowboy drawled. "Doesn't pay to have a high profile. I heard about the price on Captain McIntire, followed it up. That led me to Canaan. Once I saw what was really going on, I decided I had to lend a hand."

"Commendable," Murdock said, cocking an eyebrow.

"General Murdock," Kara spoke up, unable to contain herself, "can you tell us what's really happening? Are the aliens the Corporates produced for the Cultists really living Predecessors? And what's the

purpose of all this? Why go through all this posturing and deception? Why not just try to exploit the new technology they've discovered?"

"Mat told us about the election coming up," Deke said, "but what's the connection?"

"And what could we know," I put in, "that's important enough to go to this much trouble to try to kill us?"

Murdock regarded us silently for a long moment before he spoke.

"By way of an answer to most of your questions," he said, reaching up to a control on the table and punching in a code, "let me run back a newsfeed we picked up yesterday through the Centauri Instel Comsat."

The holomap of the Cluster faded, replaced by a shimmering nothingness that coalesced into the golden Mercury of the Trans-Commonwealth News Network, the largest provider of newsholos and ViRfeed in the Cluster. The symbol evaporated into an image straight out of Hell, a devastated landscape of crumbling buildings that protruded from the charred soil like bleached bones. The very air seemed to shimmer with heat, and I wondered what uninhabitable moonscape this was.

"This," came a voiceover in the well-modulated, authoritative tones of a computer construct, "was Grenada, a small but prosperous colony near the inner frontier of the Cluster...up until three weeks ago. Today, it is a radioactive nightmare, and it would seem that all of its three million inhabitants are dead."

"God," I heard Kara whisper hoarsely.

"Footage of Grenada's destruction was presented as part of a

stunning press release delivered to the major news agencies today by the Jameson administration, following an emergency session of the Commonwealth Senate."

The scene switched to a huge conference room deep within the Capital City complex on Earth, the overview clearly showing the eagle seal of the Commonwealth that covered most of the floor. The cameras panned inward to a large podium near the center of the room, focusing on a stocky, broad-bodied man whose shoulders strained the fabric of his grey suit. He had the jutting jaw, high cheekbones and wavy dark hair of a ViRdrama construct, but President Gregory Jameson was the real McCoy---I'd met him once.

The camera view showed the blurry shadows of figures standing next to him, just out of camera range, and as I focused on the blurs, I began to get a prickling down my spine. There was something Not Right about them, something just out of reach, like an itch I couldn't scratch.

"Fellow citizens of the Commonwealth," Jameson began, his voice was as deep and sonorous as I remembered, "in the past few weeks, we have received news that represents both the greatest opportunity and the greatest danger the human race has ever faced. Three weeks ago, a small but prosperous colony on the inner edge of the Commonwealth was totally destroyed by an unknown force, captured on video by an automatic telescope in orbit."

A holo appeared beside Jameson's right shoulder of a blue-green planet, which grew until it filled the picture, squeezing out the President's image. The image focused in on a small section of the

planet's arc, magnifying until a ship was clearly visible against the blue-white of the atmosphere.

It was basically disc-shaped, and glowed a pale, crackling blue, showing no signs of a reaction drive.

"This ship," the President went on in a voiceover, "is barely a hundred meters across."

Suddenly a coruscating line of white fire shot out from the craft, connecting it with the surface for nearly thirty seconds. Where it touched, the surface turned from blue-green to lava-red and char-black, spreading across the planet as it revolved beneath.

"There were only four of these ships in orbit around Grenada," Jameson announced grimly, "yet they managed to reduce its surface to slag in less than an hour. They then left the system, travelling through realspace, at an acceleration of several million gravities, with an estimated velocity of some three hundred times the speed of light. They headed in a direct line for the next inhabited system, but this time they were stopped."

The image shifted to a high orbital view of another blue-green habitable, then focused in to the approaching enemy ships. The discs were coming toward the world in a tight wedge, ready to fan out and take up firing positions, when another craft came into the picture from around the curve of the planet. It was a glowing, green cigar-shape, and seemed to be several times larger than its counterparts, though moving with similar acceleration and maneuverability.

The discs, seeing the approaching ship, began to decelerate and change course, breaking into a long arc away from the cigar-shape

and the planet. A pale green tendril of light extended from the larger ship's green halo and sought out the rearmost disc in the formation, enveloping it for a bare moment. The disc seemed to collapse in on itself, shrinking to only a fraction of its former size before exploding like a nova, the light from the blast filling the screen.

The picture returned to the President's face. "Just as we had found a horribly powerful new enemy we have also discovered a powerful new---or possibly old---friend. Our unexpected benefactors who saved the colony at Caroline from sharing the fate of Grenada went from there to the nearest Patrol base and asked to be taken to the center of our government. For the past two weeks, our researchers have been examining them and their spacecraft, and we have determined their story to be true.

"They call themselves the Rerscharr. We have known them for the last hundred and fifty years as the Predecessors. And now I will let them share their story with you."

The camera panned outward into a wide angle shot that revealed the tall figures standing beside him for what they were. Thin bodies that still seemed inherently powerful, with deep chests and broad shoulders, stood on long, digitigrade legs. Their arms were disproportionately short, with long, delicate, three-fingered hands, and angled oddly inward from their shoulders. Their faces were long and decidedly inhuman, with deep, dark striations running lengthwise down from large, liquid eyes. A swept-back mane of feather-like hair covered a large skull, hiding any ears that may have been there. There were three of them, virtually indistinguishable from each other

but for slight color differences in their greenish-grey skin and the brief tunics that were their only clothing.

They were the same beings that Fourcade had been shown---the same ones Kara had discovered on the outpost planet. I had a sick feeling we were too late.

"I am called Choss," one of the creatures said in a soft, sibilant hiss, "the selected representative for our race to you, our children." Its face was hauntingly animated, almost frighteningly human in the way its expressions mirrored his words. "I call you our children not just because our wormhole maps gave you the stars, but because of a more complex and long-lasting connections between our races---we share the same birth-world. As the scientists of your government have confirmed by their tests, our people evolved on the planet you now call Earth, nearly sixty-five million of your years ago, from a species you know as the dinosaurs.

"In the millennia after the great asteroid wiped out most of our evolutionary tree, the plunging temperatures and changing climate forced us into a tool-using sentience. It took our primitive ancestors nearly five million years to go from stone-tipped spears to our first slower-than-light starships, and almost a million more to discover a method of producing gravity waves which could be used to travel faster than light.

"Once we had discovered a method of rapid star travel, the majority of our people elected to leave Earth altogether, as its climate was becoming increasingly hostile, and we did not wish to interfere with the new evolutionary train that was beginning to take hold. A

close watch was kept, however, to ensure that our home world would experience no further such disasters as the one that had wiped out our sister species.

"As we spread through the stars, we found, to our chagrin, that life-bearing planets were rare, and our own intelligence was unique to this galaxy. We began, at this juncture in our history, to take on a task that would become the defining identity for our race. *Resscharr*, in our tongue, means 'the Life-Givers.'

"We dedicated ourselves to spreading life throughout the galaxy, and to nurturing it to a level of sophistication equal to our own. We began to engineer the climates of suitable planets, through methods your people can only now begin to imagine, making them habitable for us or for any oxygen breathing creature we would later introduce. We did this on thousands of worlds in the millennia that followed our exodus from the homeworld, genetically engineering flora and fauna that could flourish in each ecosystem.

"Then we undertook the most difficult task of all---engineering intelligent life. It was decided to attempt this in two different methods: a slow, more natural process of introducing key mutations in existing species over many thousands of years; and another, more rapid method of radical genetic engineering that combined artificially-grown DNA with that of a native species on one of the few planets with native life.

"The second method was attempted on a world known to you as Zeta Tucanae, and brought about the race that calls itself the Tahni. The first was used with the mammalian species on earth. You, its end



result, are our cherished children."

"Fuck me," I could hear Deke whisper beside me, half in awe, half in defiance.

"But before either of our experiments could come to its fruition," the creature continued, "we found that we were not alone, after all. The fringes of our vast empire were attacked by another race of oxygen-breathers---a criminal species that had been exiled from their own galaxy, and had travelled across the millions of light years in a huge fleet of massive starships.

"At first, we attempted to negotiate with these beings, confident that all lifeforms should be united. But these foul creatures were xenophobes, threatened by the thought of any other intelligent life, and they rebuffed our advances, continuing to attack our colonies. As painful as it was for us, we realized that we would have to respond in kind to the violence they had visited upon us.

"By the time we decided to mobilize for war, something our species had not done in over two million years, it was nearly too late---we had been cut off from all of our colonies from the other side of the Galactic core, and penned in to this region of the Spiral Arm and the few habitable worlds between it and the Core.

"In desperation, we decided to seal off this region to keep the invaders from reaching it, creating the gravitoinertially-connected bubble you have named the Cluster. But we couldn't leave our children without a birthright. So we used our gravitic technology to create the wormhole gateways, and left a map of their locations on a world of the star nearest to you. We hoped that we could keep your

Cluster safe long enough to allow you to spread through it and achieve your own culture before we would come to meet you as equals.

"Our meeting, unfortunately, was destined to be long delayed. The war lasted for nearly five thousand years, and by its end, our civilization was in ruins. Our population had never been that great to begin with, and more than eighty-five percent of us had been wiped out in the conflict. Our society, built over a longer span than humans have walked upright, had crumbled to dust, and the memories in that rubble were too painful to rebuild. We made a collective decision to leave this galaxy to you, our children, and pursue a new destiny in the body you call the Lesser Magellanic Cloud.

"Our opponents we thought totally destroyed. In this, we were wrong. Remote sensors we had left in place over a million years ago told us of a huge battle fleet moving in from a Globular Cluster off the Galactic plane, on a slow course towards the Spiral Arm. We naturally sent probes, and discovered that a remnant of our foes had fled to this cluster and, over time, had built themselves back into a military power at the expense of the environments they called home.

"They have stripped their systems dry to make themselves mighty enough to take back the galaxy they feel is theirs by right of conquest."

Choss paused from his long monologue, gazing meaningfully at the camera.

"Some of you may think our appearance unpleasant, even frightening. Allow me to show you the visage of the enemy we both

face."

The view was of a ruined city, once obviously majestic but now crumbled and burning, and still under attack. A disc-shaped craft swooped in low beside a towering spire, paused there for a second before a dazzling white beam shot out of the ship and touched the tower for an eyeblink. The building disintegrated where the beam hit, and the top section of the tower crumbled, toppling slowly to the ground hundreds of meters below.

The shot followed the tower to its impact, caught the dust cloud as it struck before panning away to a group of panic-stricken civilians running desperately through the streets. It took me a second to realize that they were Resscharr and not humans, and I wondered if that subtle uncertain haziness of their figures was intentional.

The camera view focused in on a particular couple---what seemed to be a male and a female, though the difference might have been in my mind alone. Their colored tunics were ripped and burned, and their feathered manes were darkened by soot, but they didn't appear to be injured. The one I had judged a female carried something in her hand that might have been a weapon, and seemed to be searching for something to point it at as they ran.

She led the male into an alley between two of the very few intact buildings, trying to get away from the fires and the falling debris on the street they had occupied. They jogged cautiously through the alleyway, glancing back over their shoulders to make sure they hadn't been followed.

As they emerged from the corridor, however, they froze, the

expressions on their faces changing suddenly, their gaze frozen on whatever horror lay before them, unrevealed by the camera. Raising her hand weapon, the female pressed a touch pad on the back of its handle. The gun issued a pale, crackling beam of what seemed to be charged particles, but the discharge had lasted only a fraction of a second before some invisible energy bolt struck her in the midsection and severed her at the waist in an explosion of boiling blood.

Her companion turned in a panic, trying to run, but a large, black pincer snapped out with incredible speed to seize him by the right arm. He screamed, a curiously inhuman warbling sound that sent a shiver up my back, as the pincer lifted him high in the air, and his assailant finally came into view.

I guess, more than anything else, the thing reminded me of a huge insect. Not that I would say it was insectoid, at least not in the way that we and the Tahni are humanoid---it was actually built more like some kind of monstrous crustacean, as much as it resembled any form of life I was familiar with. Yet the impression I was left with as it held the screaming Predecessor up by his bloody arm was that of an oversized scorpion.

Its head was a flattened oblong of obsidian, inlaid with a pair of deeply-recessed red orbs that I assumed were its eyes, with a pair of horizontally-hinged jaws that clicked together almost unceasingly, creating a castanet-like rhythm. What there was of its neck was nearly swallowed up by a thick plating of what seemed to be biological armor that grew out of its shoulders, covering the joints of its smaller, upper set of arms. These limbs ended in long, multijointed

fingers, made for complex manipulation, while the lower set of arms were heavy, load-bearing appendages that terminated in wicked-looking pincers. Mounted to one of the load-bearing arms, in such a manner as to be operated by the same-side manipulative limb, was the energy weapon the creature had used to cut down the female---if I had to guess, I'd say it was some kind of laser.

The thing's chitin-plated torso curved down into a complex, well-protected double-hip joint that was supported by two sets of motive limbs---I hesitated to call them legs, because they seemed to be just as dexterous as the upper sets. The forward pair were short, with well-defined digits, as if they could be used as auxiliary arms in a pinch; while the rear set were stouter and longer, curved digitigrade and clearly meant for high-speed bursts of running. The scorpion image I'd received was only enhanced by the flexible tail that waved back and forth threateningly from behind the rear set of legs, but the more dangerously threatening sting was the heavy assault cannon riding the creature's right hip.

The castanet sound grew louder as the creature grasped the struggling Predecessor male by his other arm, then yanked sharply with both pincers. The male's arms ripped out of their sockets in a spray of blood and he fell face-first to the street, shaking in fatal shock.

"We have come to know these beings," Choss continued, taking up his monologue once again, "as the Skrela. What you have just witnessed was a Skrela warrior, a subspecies that has been their fighting class for millions of years. They are hive beings, with no real

sense of individuality as you or I experience it, and the various forms their race takes are so diverse you might wonder if they were of the same evolutionary tree. Our researchers, in fact, believe that they may have been a bioengineered species, but that is no longer important. What is crucial is that they are coming this way, and unless halted, will sweep through your Commonwealth in less than five years.

"We are hopeful that, together, we may be able to conquer these abominations once more and save you, our children, from the fate that befell us. I will allow your President to outline our plan of action."

"Thank you, my friend," President Jameson said. "We must meet the enemy fleet out in interstellar space, where they can do no more damage to our colonies---I cannot allow another of our civilians to die. We will be marshaling all of our military forces, and putting the Patrol Service under central military command for the duration of the emergency.

"This would leave many of our colony worlds unprotected and unpoliced, were it not for the patriotism and foresight of our friends in the Corporate Council."

"This is where the other shoe drops," General Murdock murmured, not without admiration.

"This," the President continued as the camera panned to the left, "is Andre Damiani, the Executive Director of the Corporate Council."

The man the camera showed was handsome, with a sculpted face and immaculately-styled dark hair, yet I couldn't help but feel that his hand-made business suit concealed the heart of a snake.

"Thank you, Mr. President." Damiani looked into the video pickup. "I have offered the President the services of the Council's Corporate Security Force in order to keep order in the colonies and protect them in case of any further Skrela attacks. I will immediately place command of all CSF forces in the hands of the Commonwealth government for the duration of this struggle. God willing, they won't be needed."

Murdock touched a control and the image faded.

"That's it except for the shouting," the General told us. He scanned each of our faces with a hint of amusement in his eyes, as if he found the grand game we were all playing mildly funny. "I trust you all see the significance of this."

"Hell," I snorted, leaning back in my seat, "it's so damn obvious you'd have to be in a ViR haze to miss it. How can they expect anyone to buy this?"

"How did a short, dark-featured little runt like Hitler expect anyone to buy Aryan racial supremacy in the 1930's?" Murdock replied.

"How did Sergei Antonovich convince the Russian military that the nation could survive a thermonuclear conflict with China in the 2,010's? The Big Lie is almost always believed by the masses, Captain Mitchell. And it will be again, with the aid of the Executive and the DSI. Unless we can stop it."

"Mebbe I came in late," Cowboy spoke up, "but could someone tell me what this obvious plan is?"

"The only thing that's keeping the Council from rigging the next Presidential election is the threat of military opposition," Kara replied,

laying it out for him. "So, you send the military on a wild goose chase while the CSF takes over all law enforcement functions."

"Then you arrange an ambush, lead the fleet into a trap," said General Murdock, taking up where Kara had left off. "*Voila!* No more fleet, no more opposition---and the only organized military around is the Corporate Security Force."

"And I'm sure," I put in, "that the 'emergency' will last long enough to put Corporate puppets in power for the next few generations."

"You always were such a perceptive young man," Murdock said, smiling at me.

"But what are those things?" Deke shook his head. "These Predecessor things? I mean, I'm sure they've had to let military people look at them---they can't just be bionic constructs, or some other obvious fakes. Do you think they've really contacted the Predecessors? Or maybe those 'corpses' you found," he offered, looking at Kara, "weren't really dead."

She scratched her left hand thoughtfully. "That's always a possibility, but for some reason, I doubt it. I don't know why..."

"I do," I interjected, the answer coming to me in a flash of insight. "Did you see their facial expressions? Not just the ones with Jameson, but the ones in that little shock video? Did you notice their body language? Didn't it look just a bit too familiar?"

"Too damned human," Kara nodded.

"You're right," Murdock agreed in a soft, thoughtful voice. "Of course, if they were really Predecessor aliens, they could have been trying to be accommodating to us, but it still doesn't sit right."



"Do you think they really destroyed that colony?" West asked. "It could've been a faked shot."

I shook my head. "They had to have done it. Someone might check. God knows, it's not as if they haven't..." I had to swallow the lump in my throat before I could finish my thought. "... killed innocent people before."

"Where are we going?" Kara asked Murdock directly. "If you knew about this, you must have something planned."

"The General always has *something* planned," Deke muttered, but Murdock ignored him.

"We're on our way to the Fleet HQ on Inferno," the Bulldog told her. "I've arranged what I hope is a secret meeting there with top officers in StarFleet and the Marine Corps to discuss a plan of action that we hope won't lead to all of us spending the rest of our lives on a penal colony. Your presentation there will doubtless sway a few opinions. Until then, I suggest you all make use of the spare cabins available to get some rest and," he said, eyeing Kara and me, both of us still sporting numerous semi-healed cuts, "seek further medical attention." He rose from his chair, and I knew this meeting was over. "My guards will show you to your rooms."

\* \* \*

I was lying in the dark on the bunk in the tiny cabin Murdock had provided for me when I heard the knock on the door. I ignored it, hypnotized by the emotional inertia I'd built up, continuing to stare at the featureless ceiling.

The noise persisted, unimpressed by my lack of response.

"Cal," came a muffled voice from the other side of the door. It was Kara. "Cal, do you want to talk?"

I seriously considered the question. Did I want to talk? Did I want to bare my soul and let loose all the pain and rage that was festering in my guts? Or did I want to keep it penned inside, and let it grow hot and hard until I had the chance to vent it on the first unfortunate bastard that happened to get in my way? It was a tough call. I swung my legs off the bunk.

"Cal, do..." Kara broke off awkwardly as I pulled the door open.

She looked a lot better than the last time I had seen her. She'd had her cuts taken care of---I could see the shiny gloss of synthskin on her jawline where it covered the slice there, waiting for the flesh to heal itself beneath---and she'd changed into a pair of nondescript, tan shipware shorts and a T-shirt.

The gentle light filtering in from the corridor sent shadows playing over the curve of her face and across the hollow of her throat. I saw a teasing flash of her nipple beneath the thin T-shirt as she shifted her weight uncomfortably.

I took her by the shoulder, pulled her against me and shoved the door shut. Her breath was warm against my cheek as her eyes stared widely into mine.

"No," I decided aloud. "I don't want to talk."

## Interlude: Rachel

Rachel rapped the knuckles of her right hand into the malleable thermoplastic of the cell walls, keeping up a steady rhythm, vaguely amused at the way her new, alloy-infused fist left visible dents in the material. If only, she wished, she could bury those knuckles in the face of one of her captors. It wouldn't do much to improve her situation, but it would certainly make her feel better. She was scared, true, but her feelings of fright were nothing next to the overwhelming sense of impotence.

They'd brought her here---wherever "here" was---under suspension, so she wasn't even a hundred percent sure *when* she was. For all she knew, she could have been in hibernation for a decade. When she'd come to, she'd found herself in this white-walled, windowless cell, about five meters by five meters. It was fairly comfortable, as jails went---fold down bed, exercise machine, shower and a ViR player with a good-sized library---but it was still a jail.

She'd been there and awake, she calculated, for nearly three weeks now, with the only human being she'd seen the attendant who brought her food, and she felt like she was slowly going insane. The worst part of it all was not knowing about Cal and the others. They could have been dead for months, for all she knew.

There was a loud crunch, and she looked down in surprise, seeing that she'd put a five- centimeter-deep depression in the plastic. She shook her stinging hand and leaned back against the wall. How long,

she wondered, would they keep her here?

The door to her cell hissed open and she jumped up with a start as a tall, powerfully-built Tahni stepped into the room.

"Don't be frightened, Mrs. Mitchell," the Tahni male said in perfect Basic as the door slid shut behind him. "I'm as close to a friend as you have on this base."

"Who are you?" she asked, trying to keep the tremors out of her voice.

"My name is Trint," the humanoid replied. "I don't have too much time---I sent the attendants away on an errand, and temporarily disabled the surveillance cameras, but that will only buy us a few minutes."

"A few minutes for what?" she asked, fighting the small spark of hope lighting up in her mind.

The Tahni named Trint didn't sit down and didn't move from his position just inside the door as he answered her.

"Holding you here is not honorable," he said. "Attacking your enemy's family is not the way of the warrior. At this moment, there is no way I can free you, but I thought it my duty to at least tell you where you are, and why you are being held."

Rachel eyed him suspiciously. "I don't recall the Tahni as being too reluctant to kill noncombatants in the War. What makes you any different?"

"The actions of one man corrupted our race." Trint's face went harder---if that was possible. "Our emperor was not worthy of his people, and far too many of those people were not worthy of the title

'warrior.' But I was...I *am* something more, yet also something less than those I served. You have heard of the Imperial Guard."

Rachel's eyes widened, and a flush of terror from instincts honed in the War went through her.

"My God..." she gasped. "You're one of the cyborgs." Cyborg, she knew, was almost too tame a word for the elite special operations commandos. They weren't just ordinary men with bionic parts grafted on---they were total constructs, a self-contained version of her new right arm. Alloy endoskeletons had been fleshed out with a few cloned organs and surrounded by plastic-fiber muscles, superconductive nerves and cloned skin, all controlled by a combination of lab-cultivated brain tissue and computer CPU.

"But...they hunted all of you down, didn't they?"

"Most of us." There was a hint of sadness in his voice. "But what I am is not important to you. What you are is the issue."

"What am I?" she asked, awed by the mere presence of what had been a living nightmare.

"You are a hostage. Your husband has contacted officials in StarFleet Intelligence, and my...master believes that they plan a raid on this base. He expects to have a trap waiting for the assault force, but you are a guarantee. Your husband frightens my master and his security chief. He is an X-factor with a history of doing things in an unorthodox manner."

"The world's full of amateurs..." Rachel muttered to herself, shaking her head.

"What?" Trint frowned.

"An old saying my husband told me back during the War," she explained. "He called it one of 'Murphy's Laws of Combat.' It went, 'Professional soldiers are always predictable---but the world's full of amateurs.' He always called himself an amateur soldier."

"Indeed." The Tahni cyborg smiled---*smiled!* "No wonder your people won the War."

"So is your duty discharged now?" Rachel asked, wondering just how far she could trust the mysterious alien.

"My duty is to myself, Mrs. Mitchell," Trint informed her. "Though I admire you and your husband, I am constrained by certain cruel realities, the foremost of which is a small explosive device planted in my cranium as a safeguard by my new master, Andre Damiani. If my loyalty to him is ever in question, he can blow my head off with but a thought."

"Why don't you just run away?" she wondered, frowning at such a barbaric idea. "Get out of his transmission range?"

"Where could I go?" he asked her.

Rachel started to answer, but stopped herself. He had a point. For the cyborgs, the war was never over. The Commonwealth considered them too dangerous to leave alive; any that were discovered, even this long after the war, were destroyed without warning. Even his own people hated and feared the Imperial Guard, regarding them as little better than machines and as alien as any human enemy despite the Tahni genes that made up their biological component. And it wasn't as if he could just blend in with the crowd somewhere---a simple thermal scan would reveal him for what he was. She could hardly

offer him shelter, either---her home wasn't safe for her, much less him.

"So what happens now?"

"We wait," he told her. "Sooner or later, the strike force will come. Then it may be out of our hands."

"And if the strike force fails..." She let the question trail off.

"You'll probably be killed once Damiani feels he no longer needs you," Trint told her directly.

"How are they so sure about what Cal is doing?" Rachel asked, dismissing the realization of her impending mortality even as it was presented to her.

"There is a spy among them," Trint revealed, his respect for the woman going up a notch. "Damiani's chief of security was one of your husband's teammates during the War. He has insinuated himself into his confidence."

"Damn," she murmured, falling heavily on her cot. "There's no way you could let him know?"

"None, even if I was so inclined."

"How can you serve him?" Rachel snapped, angered at the flatness of his answer. "Is this kind of life really worth living?"

"You forget what I am," Trint admonished her. "I am not, so to speak, my own man. My programming doesn't bind me to Damiani---or anyone else, now that the Emperor is dead without successor---but quite apart from any feelings I may have, my constraints will not allow me to choose my own death. I may be ordered to my death, and I may be killed in battle, but I may not throw my existence away uselessly, or kill myself."

"Oh." Rachel looked down, a bit ashamed she'd even made the suggestion. Who was she, after all, to tell this creature how and when to die?

The Tahni regarded her silently for a moment, feelings wrestling in his breast that he had never experienced before.

"I will promise you this," Trint said quietly, "and it is all I can give. If it becomes possible for me to aid you without assuring my destruction, I will do so."

Rachel's head came up. "I appreciate what you're trying to do. Will...will you come and talk to me again? It gets pretty lonely."

"I'll try," Trint promised, surprising himself. He'd fully intended to say no, that it would be too risky, but there was something appealing in conversing with someone who didn't see him either as a tool or a monster. "Time is short. Is there anything else I can tell you?"

"One more thing," Rachel said. "The spy? The old team member? Who is he?"

When he told her, Rachel drew in a breath, not even looking at him as he exited the room. Of all of the answers she could have been given, that was, perhaps, the worst possible. Cal had told her about that man: he was, in Cal's opinion, probably the most dangerous of the whole team, and he was lying like a snake waiting to strike her husband.

And there was nothing she could do about it.



## Chapter Twelve

I blinked groggily into wakefulness, light streaming in from the room's open balcony. Waking with the sunrise was an odd thing for me---sunrise on Canaan only happened once every couple Standard months. Waking with someone other than Rachel was even stranger.

Propping myself up on an elbow, I regarded Kara as she lay beside me. In sleep, her face softened, the corners of her mouth upturned slightly. It was all a deception. In bed, she was a tiger, as aggressive in her lovemaking as she was in a knife fight. It was her strength on mine, and it was an interesting new experience, though not without guilt.

Gnawing at my guts was the accusation that I was being unfaithful to Rachel's memory. Yet alongside the guilt was the realization that I needed this. Rachel was gone, my life was gone and even the Machine had failed me. If I hadn't found some kind of release, I would've cracked, come completely unhinged. I couldn't afford that yet.

I eased out of bed, feeling the chill of the air conditioning on my bare skin, and padded silently out to the balcony. The oppressive humidity washed across me, chasing the chill away, and I squinted at the too-harsh light from too-close 82 Eridani. Yawning lazily, I leaned over the railing. Ten stories beneath me sprawled the computer-pattern grid of preform buildings that was the sector command base at Inferno.

The military, I reflected, never had much imagination---everything for five kilometers on any side, from the data processing centers to the medical facilities, was a flat-white buildfoam box. At the center of it all was the spaceport, a huge complex of square, fusion-form landing pads and massive hangars. The petulant whine of landing jets vibrated in my head as I watched a small shuttle coming down from orbit.

We'd arrived in a similar craft over seventy hours ago, and had immediately been chauffeured by high-speed hopper to the Guest Officers' Quarters at the perimeter of the huge base. It was a typical military game of hurry up and wait---the brass we were supposed to meet weren't due for another three days.

Feeling the touch of soft hands on my back, I slipped an arm around Kara as she came beside me. She was still naked, and her skin felt pleasantly cool by contrast with the oppressive humidity on the balcony.

"Good morning." She kissed me passionately, her tongue slipping into my mouth. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby." I gave her a squeeze.

"Beautiful view," she muttered, wrinkling her nose at the haze that drifted low over the military base. "Is the climate this miserable everywhere?"

"Oh, hell no," I said. "Some of the planet's uninhabitable. Y'know, if the Predecessors *did* engineer this world, they did a really shitty job."

"Too bad they couldn't move it a bit farther back from the sun."

"Maybe moving planets was a bit beyond them." I laughed. "Shit. I can't believe they expect anyone to buy that story."

"Don't be so sure," Kara warned me. "The Corporates are a lot of things, but they aren't stupid. This *will* be believed, or they wouldn't try it. You don't see it, because Canaan's so out-of-the-way, but the Predecessor Cult has spread its influence into the highest levels. Jameson's a Corporate puppet, sure, but he *believes* it. He *wants* to believe it." She sat down on the wide railing, glancing down at the base. I idly wondered what anyone would think if they looked up and saw a beautiful, naked woman with her legs dangling off of a tenth-story balcony.

"It's about religion," she opined softly, looking back up at me. "People don't know what to believe in. My grandparents used to be part of the Church of Man---remember that? They tried to unify all of old Earth's religions, from Wicca to Islam; it was an outgrowth of the old ecumenical movement. They had the biggest churches on a dozen worlds. Then we got the Transition drive, and the Expansion, and the Second War, and the whole thing fell apart. For the last forty years or so, literally thousands of the looniest cults and religions you've ever heard of have all been trying to fill the void. I know---I've had to investigate some of them.

"The problem, I guess," she went on, "is that no one has an image of God big enough to fit the big universe we live in, but small enough for us to understand."

"But the Predecessor Cult does?" I squinted skeptically.

"For a lot of people. A mysterious, powerful race that gave us our

intelligence and a lot of the worlds we live on...a race that disappeared aeons ago, but could come back any time to set things right. It's all tailor made for a people hungry for something to worship, some kind of hope...some kind of destiny."

"So you actually think it'll work, huh?" I reached out to run a hand down her shoulder.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the riots have already started on Earth, Sylvanus, Aphrodite---hell, even over on Eden," she jabbed a finger at the sky, referring to Inferno's more temperate sister world, the third planet out from 82 Eridani.

"Kind of makes you not want to bother trying to stop them." I shook my head, letting my arms fall to my sides.

"There's still only one good reason, Cal." She took my hand and held it in both of hers. "If we don't, they'll kill us."

*Cal, I heard Mat's voice say in my head. Come to the General's office ASAP. There's someone here you need to talk to.*

*Right. Do you want Kara there, too?*

*Bring her,* he replied. *And get here quick.* Then the transmission ended. I turned to Kara.

"We need to get dressed."

Murdock's office was in the local Fleet Intelligence headquarters, less than a kilometer away from the Officers' Quarters. On foot, at a brisk trot, it took Kara and I less than three minutes to make our way through the streets to the faceless, four-story building, yet we were already sweating like a racehorse in heat by the time we reached the solace of climate control once again.

There were three separate security seals between the entrance and the General's office, and we had to go through every one of them, letting them scan our retinas and MRI us for hidden bombs---it wouldn't have let us pass with our implant weapons if the Bulldog hadn't cleared it in the central security system. Finally, we made it to the large suite of offices that was Murdock's home away from home, and were allowed into his private conference room by the Marine guards stationed there.

Mat and the General were there, but I barely spared them a glance. For also in the room were three of the most unexpected sights I'd seen in my short life. One was unexpected by virtue of its strangeness: it was a monstrous product of bionic reconstruction, a full two meters tall with four arms, a *tail*, and a face that was something out of a nightmare. The other two...

The other two were Pete and Jason.

"Christ..." I breathed, and then I was flying across the room, gathering them up into my arms, sobbing with tears I didn't believe I had left in me. I couldn't think for a moment, but when I could I held them out at arm's length, suddenly back to reality. "Rachel," I said in a surge of desperate hope. "Where is she? Is she alive?"

"We don't know," Jason shook his head.

"They took her, Cal," Pete blurted. "I was there, but..."

"There was an assault on the medical center," Jason told me.

I nodded impatiently. "I know, I know. Cowboy, one of our old team, was onplanet, and he told me. But he said you'd all been killed..."

"We helped spread that rumor," Jason explained. "We thought it would be better if they believed we were dead. But Pete and Rachel were flying out in a hopper before the shuttles came in and destroyed Mt. Carmel---they were shot down, and hit with a sonic."

"The pilot was still conscious," Pete went on, "and he said they took Rachel out of the hopper and left us."

"They mean to use her against you," the monster told me in a surprisingly pleasant voice.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked it in frank amazement.

"What?" The thing *smiled*. "No hug for an old friend, Constable Mitchell?" He spread the bigger pair of his four upper limbs playfully. "I'm hurt you don't recognize me, though I suppose I should have expected it. When last we met, you see, I was just a bit...dead."

"Pardon me?" I blinked.

"Cutter?" I heard Kara's disbelieving whisper as she approached from behind me. "Holy Mother of God, is it really you?"

"Cutter?" I gaped in disbelief. "But that's impossible!"

"Unlikely, for sure," he admitted.

"That's something else that may be pertinent to our situation," Murdock spoke up for the first time since we walked in. He rose from his desk, stepping around between us. "Your friends managed to contact the Intelligence office on our base at Aphrodite due to Mr. Chang's connections from his days in the DSI, and they were directed here after my office was contacted."

"Mr. Chang?" I repeated, by now thoroughly confused.

"Someone I used to be," the monster explained. "I am him no

longer, just as I am no longer the man called Cutter. The creature I am now, you may call Secarius; and, from what I understand, how I came to be in this body may explain some current events."

"I think I need to sit down." I fell into one of the chairs in front of the desk, my head spinning. Rachel was alive...That thought echoed back and forth through my head, bouncing around with a convoluted mix of joy, relief and waves of guilt, drowning out everything else.

"Our friend," Mat said, seeming a bit bemused by the thing, "may have an explanation for how Damiani was able to produce living Predecessors that would cooperate with him."

"And a fascinating situation it is," Secarius...Cutter...whoever the hell it was said. He used his articulated tail as a rest to lean back on as he spoke. "When I gathered my resources together to establish my identity as Cutter, I used my former connections with the DSI to acquire the latest in genetic technology---I figured it would be prudent to have the best product if I was to corner the market, so to speak. Among the latest developments, and one that has not yet been introduced for mass consumption, is a process called genetic reconstruction.

"It's an outgrowth of cloning technology that was developed during the war; but it had no military application, so it was ignored by the government." He smiled again, an unnerving sight. "I've found it very useful. It essentially allows the complete reconstruction of a living adult organism from only a small sample of genetic material. I used that method to produce this body---although I've since made several modifications to the original design."

I came forward in my seat. "You're saying that the Corporates could have used the genetic material from the corpses in stasis to produce adult copies of the Predecessors?"

"Exactly, my dear policeman," Secarius agreed cheerfully.

"But how could he get them to cooperate, even if he could clone them?" Kara asked him. "Wouldn't they still retain their same personalities?"

"A force-grown clone construct," Secarius corrected her, shaking his massive head, "has a blank slate for a brain. Simply install a temporary neurolink, and you can implant any memories you choose to manufacture."

"You're saying these things actually believe what they're telling Jameson?" I asked incredulously. "They think they've been sent to save us from an invasion?"

"Very probably," Mat answered. I could still see a faint, pink line around his neck where the new flesh was still growing. It had taken him several days in the automedic to stabilize him after losing so much blood, but he seemed as good as new. "Once we heard Mr. Chang's story, we ran it by our Intelligence research and development people---what he says checks out. It's not only possible, but our best AI's assign it a ninety percent probability rate."

"Then...Robert," said Kara, using the name tentatively, as if she'd not called Chang by that name for a long time, "it's not really you; it's a cloned body with your memories."

"That, my lovely Kara, is a philosophical and religious question," Secarius replied. "And one I do not feel remotely qualified to answer."



Suffice it to say, I am not Robert Chang any more than I am Cutter. For the moment, for the span of this life, I am Secarius the Slayer, and my work is to avenge my own murder. Later, there may again be a time for the man you knew as Robert."

"Sweet Gaia." Kara's face went pale.

"What's wrong?" Mat asked her. "You look like someone's walking on your grave."

"You know what this means?" she asked, nodding toward Secarius. "All of this? If this kind of technology spreads, do you know what's going to happen to us?"

"It's a disturbing thought," General Murdock agreed. "But not one we can afford to dwell on at this time. Right now, our main priority is finding the base these clone constructs were produced at and using it to prove our case to the government. If we can't...well, even if we somehow manage to halt Damiani's machinations, our life expectancies won't be too great."

"It had to be on this place they called the Rock," I surmised. "That's where the bodies were taken. I'd wager it's where they'd stash Rachel, too, if they plan to use her as a hold on me."

"Nothing yet on where that might be," Mat said.

"Perhaps one of our prospective allies has some idea about that," Murdock suggested. "For now, perhaps you," he regarded Kara and I, "should take your friends back to the Guest Officers' Quarters."

"I'll arrange a car," Mat offered, looking significantly at Secarius. "It'll attract less attention. If you'd all follow me..."

I waited till he had led the others out of the room before I turned

back to Murdock.

"Why didn't you have Deke and Cowboy here?" I asked Murdock point-blank. "Shouldn't they hear about this?"

"I didn't get where I am by being a trusting person." Murdock looked me squarely in the eye. "West is an X-factor, and I don't like X-factors. *Everyone* has a history, whether they're in the Pirate Worlds or in the Presidential mansion.

"You're the constable of a small colony," he began, ticking off on his fingers, "Mat's in my employ, Holly Morai's a Major in StarFleet, Reggie Nakamura runs a private security firm, and Keller Savage has built his own mercenary brigade on the outer frontier. I've kept track, and everyone has a history.

"Yet, for the past six years, Roger West has none. No one covers their tracks that well without a reason." He leaned back in his chair.

"As for Conner, well, he's had a checkered career since leaving the military. I don't particularly care if he makes his living outside the law, but he's unstable. He proved that ten years ago, when I helped him get out of an assault charge. Add to that the story you and Agent McIntire told me about your experience on the Predecessor outpost. That research director you wanted to question---*someone* tore his throat out." He shook his head. "There's too much evidence of an inside man here for me to trust anyone fully."

"What about me?" I asked, frankly curious.

"I told you," he said with a tight smile, "I'm not a trusting person. However, with you at least, I do know who and what I'm dealing with."

"Nice to know I'm easy to figure out," I chuckled humorlessly.

"I admire people who are straightforward, Caleb," he allowed. "It's refreshing, especially in my business."

I squirmed uncomfortably. "Well, I guess I'd better catch up to the others."

As I exited the office, I almost ran headlong into Kara. She'd been waiting just outside the door, a troubled expression on her face.

"Uh," I stammered, "hi. You didn't catch the car with Mat and them?"

"I thought you might want to walk back," she explained.

I shrugged, following her out of the building into the garish sunlight.

"I'm glad your wife is alive," she told me.

"Thanks," I muttered numbly, my thoughts in a furor, trying to decide what I should say. All I could feel was elation that Rachel was still alive, and a growing weight of guilt over my liaison with Kara. What she would be feeling in this situation I had no idea. I walked beside her in silence for a moment.

"It's all right," she finally said, taking my hand in hers, a tender smile on her face. "You don't have to feel uncomfortable. I understand." She squeezed my hand, then laughed softly. "I guess I'll have to move back into my own room now."

"Yeah," I agreed, fighting back a feeling of reluctance. As Deke had so accurately pointed out, a value system is a terrible thing. "Tell me something," I asked her, eager to change the subject, "what did you mean back in there, when you were talking about what genetic

reconstruction technology would do to us?"

"Just think about it for a second, Cal," she said, frowning deeply. "Right now, we have the ability to store a person's memories on disc and transfer them into another's brain through a neurolink or a 'face jack. We've been using that so far only for teaching and training military personnel and for recording missions, mostly because the only people who've had the equipment have been in the military.

"Now," she went on, waving a hand, "you've got skingangers, freighterjocks, Netdivers and mercenaries using headcomps and 'links and 'face jacks. *Anyone* can get one, if they have the money. Then along comes this genetic reconstruction and a small sample of genetic material is all it takes to produce an adult clone copy of any living organism."

"Shit," I muttered, finally realizing just what she was talking about.

"Exactly. Take your circumstances as a Constable. You kill a bad guy, or put him in psych rehab, then you find out he froze a cell sample and kept an updated copy of his memories on disc, and all of a sudden you've got an exact copy of your criminal running around."

"Or maybe more than one," I said, swallowing hard.

"Or maybe more than one," she repeated. "Where does he stand legally? Is it the same person, who's still wanted by the law, or is it a different person, with a clear record and a license to keep committing crimes?"

"Goddamn," I hissed, the scope of it all washing over me.

"Well, that's another problem---the religious and philosophical side of it all. If someone dies and has a clone duplicate made of

themselves with the exact same memories, is it really the same person? Does it have the same soul, if there is a thing that can be called a soul? Is it still your wife, or child or parent?"

"Or your friend," I added pointedly.

"Yes, there's that," she sighed. "I knew Robert Chang, maybe better than I've ever known anyone, and I knew what he became as Cutter. This Secarius---is it still Robert, is it Cutter? Is there anything left of him in it? And how will I know if there is?"

"Great," I commented. "Another 'ally' we have to watch. Wouldn't it be nice if we could actually trust all the people who're supposed to be on our side?"

"Murdock seems to believe him. And he isn't known for his gullibility. But I'm not... comfortable with all of this." She frowned, looking me in the eye. "What about you, Cal? What are you going to do if they try to use your wife as a hostage?"

"I'll do whatever I have to," I told her honestly. "I'm not going to let her die, Kara. Even if it means dying myself."

"I won't let it come to that," Kara declared, certainty in her voice. "She's in trouble because of me. I swear to you, Cal, I'll do everything I can to get her out. You both deserve better than this."

"God knows," I said, a hint of the weariness I felt creeping into my tone, "we all deserve better than this. Maybe..." I trailed off helplessly, "maybe we'll get some help when those friends of the General's arrive."

"Maybe." She sounded unconvinced. I wished I could have tried to reassure her---but I had my own doubts about the ability of a bunch of generals to agree on the velocity of light, much less to overthrow the

elected government of the Commonwealth.

## Chapter Thirteen

"Most of you know each other, if only by reputation." General Murdock regarded the assembled officers from the Commonwealth military gathered around the conference table. "But there are a few newcomers," he went on, eyeing Secarius significantly, "so I'll make introductions." He nodded toward the short, grim-faced, shaven-headed man next to him. "This is General Leontin Sikorsky, Commandant of the Ranger Corps and an old friend. Next to him, clockwise, is Colonel Trina Gutierrez, Senior Aide to the Chief of the Marine Corps." The Colonel was an attractive woman, with much hard muscle and cropped, blond hair. Her uniform, I noted, was the neatest of the group.

"Across the table are Colonel Kane Pickett, Commander of the StarFleet's Attack Wing, and Admiral Yussef O'Brien, Chief Tactical officer for Fleet Admiral Sato."

Pickett was a short, wiry man with chocolate skin and an easy, confident smile. The Admiral cut a broad-bodied, muscular figure that strained against his uniform, and wore a barely-ordered mop of flaming red hair. His face was set in a perpetual frown, as if he'd just eaten something that didn't agree with him.

"The final representative of the military is Colonel Foster Sinclair, Deputy Commander of the Scout Service." The Colonel, seated directly across from me, was an unassuming, relaxed human female of African heritage. She was also the only one of us in the room who

wore a sidearm. How she had gotten past the security seals with it I wasn't certain.

"That's it for the collective brass," Bulldog said, smiling thinly. "Now I'd like to familiarize all of you with the few people intimately familiar with the little problem we've been having with the Corporate Council."

After the General had introduced each of us and gave a brief description of our parts in the whole affair---I noticed a few eyebrows rising when he got to Secarius---he opened the meeting for any questions the officers might have for us.

"I'd say there's only one real question that needs to be asked," Admiral O'Brien spoke up, "and it needs to be asked of you, General Murdock. If you have told us the truth, and the situation is as it seems, what do you expect us to do?"

"There is only one path we can take on the short term," the Bulldog declared. "We must find out where this place called 'the Rock' is, and hit it immediately with a commando raid. It is imperative that we find proof that the Corporates are behind this hoax, and expose their machinations to the Senate and members of the media we can trust." His face clouded over. "And if we can prove it, we have to be prepared for a violent reaction by the Corporate Security Force and their allies in the Predecessor cults. If we're unprepared for it, we could be facing a massacre."

"We'll handle that when it comes," Leo Sikorsky rumbled with a voice like boulders crashing on a field of gravel. "For now, do any of you have an idea where this place called 'the Rock' is?"



There was a long silence, and I felt an emptiness in my gut as our only lead slipped away. But then...

"I might have an idea." The answer, spoken in a laconic drawl, came from West. "Back in the war," the bounty hunter told us, "there was a place I heard rumors of, a weapons development center for the Corporate Council. I had a few friends in the R&D end of the Fleet, and they always called it 'Petra.' I didn't make the connection till just now, but that's Latin for 'the Rock.' All I know is that it was supposed to be somewhere within a week's jump from the Tau Ceti base."

"That gives a start," Murdock said. "Computer," he said to the room's pickup, "display a GI map of the area of space within a fifty light-year diameter of Tau Ceti." A holographic display snapped into existence over the conference table, showing a series of star systems connected by red, dotted lines representing the gravitoinertial pathways along which Transition drive ships travelled.

"Now," Murdock continued, "highlight any systems without habitable planets." That needed no explanation---we were all sensible enough to realize that the Council wouldn't put a secret research base in a system with habitables. The computer complied, and over a dozen of the star systems displayed were suddenly glowing brighter than the others.

"Might as well take out any that have mineral surveys on them," Kara pointed out. "They wouldn't want prospectors or freelance scouts nosing around."

When that condition had been applied, there remained only three highlighted systems, broadly separated by at least twenty light-years.

"Now what?" Deke wondered.

"Computer," the Bulldog ordered again, "bring up any information available from civilian or military database on the three indicated systems."

"THD-2307 is an M type star," the computer's saccharine voice reported, "with no planetary bodies. It is orbited only by a thick dust cloud composed of hydrogen and silicon. No further information is recorded.

"MRS-341 is a G-type star. No further information is recorded.

"KHG-987 is a K-type star with two planets, both gas giants..."

"That's enough, computer," Murdock snapped, cutting it off. "Bring up a close-up view of MRS-341."

The system enlarged into a representation of a burning star with an outlying belt of large asteroids, possibly debris from a failed planet.

"If there's nothing recorded about the system," Kara said, "then why's that asteroid belt in the icon." It wasn't a question.

"Sloppy," Murdock commented. "They managed to erase the databank's file, but they didn't think to change the icon."

"I can have a team out to take a look in forty hours," Sinclair offered.

"It'll take too long," I cut in, not caring if I was speaking out of turn. "Three weeks round trip. By then, they'll be recalling Patrol Units and the takeover by the Council Security Force will have already started. Once they have their people in place, it'll be impossible to get them out without civilian casualties." I looked around at the officers, and at my friends. "Whatever we're gonna' do, we'd better do it now."

There was an awkward silence, and all of them looked to General Murdock.

"Mitchell's right," he said. "We'll do our reconnaissance when we get there."

"Recon by fire," Deke muttered, snorting ruefully. "My kind of mission."

"I'm afraid not, Captain Conner," the General said, and I got this bad feeling that something ugly was about to happen right in front of me.

"Pardon me, sir?" Deke frowned, the hint of hostility in his tone giving me a clue that he knew what was up.

"I'm sorry, Deacon," Murdock said, shaking his head. "It's not that I believe you're a traitor, but in my position, I just can't take that kind of risk."

"Listen, I didn't ask to be dragged into this," Deke snapped stridently, rising from his chair "Cal came to *me!* How the hell can you turn me out and let this loose cannon," he demanded, waving at Cowboy, "just waltz in and take a seat?"

"To be honest," General Murdock admitted, unfazed by Deke's outburst, "I wasn't totally sure about allowing Major West to participate in this operation until he gave us the Rock...if it weren't for him, we'd be stuck without an objective. A rather unlikely action for a traitor, wouldn't you agree?"

"So that's it, then?" He snorted in obvious disgust. "What about you, bud?" He fixed me with a glare. "Are you just going to sit there and let him get away with this?"

"I don't want to," I told him, feeling tired, helpless and very, very sad. "But I've got to be there for Rachel, Deke. I don't have a choice." I was talking to him, but my eyes were on Murdock, not trying to disguise my disappointment.

Deke nodded, swallowing hard. "Well, I guess there's not much else to say, then." Without another word, he turned on his heel and left the room.

I'd read the term "awkward silence" before, but I'd never before found such a perfect example of one in real life. The military among us slouched in their seats or tried to look the other way, while West tried to appear unconcerned and Pete and Jase were unabashedly confused. I felt Kara's comforting hand on my arm and patted it gratefully.

"I apologize for airing our dirty laundry in your presence," Murdock told the brass. "Now that the more unseemly matters are behind us, can I count on your support in this matter?"

There was a silent chorus of nods, some of them more hesitant than others. "Then all that remains is what we'll need from each of you..."

\* \* \*

My hand hovered in front of the door, hesitating in the midst of the act of knocking. What could I say to him? What would make things go back to the way they were? I lowered the hand and started to turn away, but a host of memories blocked my way, forcing me to go back and knock firmly on the door.

"Yeah?" The answer was more dejected than hostile.

"It's me, Deke," I said. "Can I come in?"

There was no answer for a long moment, but then the door slid aside and I suddenly stood facing him. His expression was impassive, but I could see the hurt at the corners of his eyes. Glancing behind him into his room, I saw his bags open on his bed, nearly full with his clothes and gear. Several empty whiskey bottles lay scattered about on the floor, glittering harshly in the morning sunlight filtering through the window blinds.

"Whatcha' need, Caleb boy?" he mumbled, his voice a bit slurred, the distinct odor of alcohol washing over me.

"Mat told me you were leaving today," I said, trying to find something to do with my hands to keep them from fidgeting.

"Sure as hell am!" He pounded a palm against the doorjamb.

"Pretty obvious I'm not wanted around here, isn't it?"

"Uh..." I glanced around the hallway, saw Fleet officers walking here and there. "Mind if I come in?"

"Don't matter to me," he replied, backing up from the door. "In a couple hours, won't be my room anymore."

I stepped inside, hitting the control to close the door behind me while he went back to packing. I stepped over to the window, kicking a stray bottle out of the way, and opened the blinds, taking a long glance at the high walls of the spaceport, clearly visible in the distance. As I watched, the angry wedge shape of an Attack Command cutter swooped out of the sky, turbines screaming, to light down somewhere inside the walls of the port.

"Those boys've been coming in pretty regular," Deke commented,

not looking away from his task of trying to fold a recalcitrant jacket small enough to fit in his shoulder bag. "Hard to get a good afternoon's sleep around here lately."

"Mission's a 'go' in sixty hours." I left the window, leaning back against a dresser to watch his efforts. "I'm kind of surprised Murdock's letting you go at this point---doesn't make much sense, if he really didn't trust you."

"Naw, he's got it all figured out," Deke shook his head in bitter admiration. "He's going to have me escorted far enough away that I wouldn't be able to get to an Instel station soon enough to cause any trouble." He jammed a pair of wadded-up pants into his suitcase, then forced the overloaded piece of baggage closed. "At least he's giving me my ship back. I'd hate to lose the *Dutchman*."

"I wish there was something I could do to change Bulldog's mind," I told him. "If there was, I'd do it."

He regarded me levelly for a moment, with a very unintoxicated, serious expression, but it passed, and he laughed drunkenly, slapping me on the shoulder.

"I believe you, Caleb, I believe you. God knows, if I was you, I'd do the same thing." He turned back to the bed, closing his other bag. I stood there uncomfortably, realizing the time and cursing the lack of it.

"I've got to get to the final mission brief," I confessed. "I just didn't want to let you leave without..." I trailed off, shrugging mutely.

"Wouldn't want to get you in hot water with the ol' Bulldog, Cap'n Mitchell," Deke said, offering me a hand. "Good luck."

"To you, too." I shook it, feeling like I'd probably never see him again, however this all turned out. I gripped his hand for a lingering second, then let it slip free of my grasp. I felt like I should have said something more, but no more words would come.

"We'll cross paths again," he assured me with that crooked grin, reading my expression. "You go give 'em hell."

"I'll do that, Slick." I turned and left the room. At least, I figured, he would be safer than we would. Truth to tell, I'd been having a strong premonition that none of us would come back from Petra alive.

## Interlude: Trint

The Tahni looked at the device in his hands, made with those same hands. How ironic, he thought---a machine made by another machine to save the life of a machine. How ironic for a machine to think it had a life. How very ironic for a machine to think it understood the nature of irony.

But, if this machine had done his work correctly, the small piece of equipment he held, barely the size of one of his finger-joints, would be able to jam Damiani's signal to the bomb implanted in his cortex for at least a half an hour. Plenty of time to kill the little bastard. He stuffed the gadget in his coverall pocket and hit the control to open the cell.

Rachel Mitchell rose from her seat at the exercise machine, sweeping sweat-matted hair out of her eyes as she stepped up to meet the cyborg.

"What is it?" she asked him, fear and hope mixed in her eyes.

"They're coming," he closed the door behind him. "The assault team should arrive in less than one hundred hours."

"They'll be waiting for him," she said softly, wiping her hands on the front of the loose sweatshirt she'd been provided with.

"There's an entire attack wing waiting for them," Trint confirmed. He sounded, he realized, very cold and mechanical, but he didn't want to give her false hope. "They're to be captured intact, if possible. The ships they intend to use in their plan to fake the destruction of the



Commonwealth armed forces. The troops will be given the chance to defect---including your husband. Damiani is particularly interested in recruiting your husband; he feels that anyone who can cause him this much trouble should be working for him."

"Cal would never join him," Rachel declared with fierce conviction.

"He may," Trint countered, "if your life is in the balance."

"Oh, God," she moaned, cradling her head in her hands. She looked back up to him. "Is there anything you can do?" He regarded her silently for long seconds.

"There may be," he replied finally. "I may have found a chance. Not much of one...but perhaps enough to override my programming and ensure a possibility for survival. But I can do nothing until after the attack. Then I might be able to count on your husband for help."

"What can I do?" Rachel asked.

"Just try to stay alive, Mrs. Mitchell." Trint hesitantly reached out his hand, touching her gently on the arm. She began to flinch, but stopped herself. She'd expected something cold and lifeless, but his hand was warm---warmer even than a human's. "If I *am* to end this odd existence of mine, I'd rather it meant something."

"Trint," she said, putting her hand over his and squeezing it gently, "you try to stay alive, too, okay?"

The Tahni tried to reply, but the answer caught in his throat. She was the first human---the first sentient being---to ever show concern for him. The feel of her skin against his was strange, yet pleasant at the same time.

"I will," he promised.

He slipped his hand from hers and exited the cell. Suddenly, he no longer felt like a machine.

## Chapter Fourteen

I came out of hibernation slowly, as I always did, with a haze of scattered memory: a flash of sunlight off of the transport carrying Deke away as Kara and I watched from the street outside the spaceport.

"It's for the best," she told me, squeezing my arm, trying to be supportive.

I shook my head. "If he went with us, at least we'd know. Now...I'll never know."

A glare of harsh Eridani-light, and a segway to...

"I don't like it," Pete grumbled again, walking between Jason and me to the final mission brief. The halls of the Intel Center were packed with military personnel from every service except the Patrol, and it seemed like every damn one of them was trying to get to the same conference room. "Jase and me come all this way, and now we don't get to go along on the operation, but that freak Secarius does?"

"Not my decision, Pete," I assured him, secretly grateful he and Jase would be out of harm's way. "The General decided the final roster, and he wanted Chang because of his previous Cadre experience...not to mention his obvious physical assets."

"Well, I don't trust him," my little brother declared. "Anyone that would do that shit to themselves has to be a psych burnout. God, he's hardly human anymore..."

I didn't answer him; I just stared at my hands, his words ringing in

my ears. Hardly human anymore...

Light again, this time so intense it had to be real, and I squinted reflexively, even as my corneal implants polarized to accommodate it until my pupils constricted. My skin was sticky with biotic fluid, my tongue felt like I'd swallowed a cat, and my head was pounding in rhythm to my pulse.

I really hate hibernation.

Shaking away the cobwebs, I levered myself up to a half-sitting position in the clear plastic coffin that had been my resting place for our twelve-day long flight to MRS-341. The chamber's lid had popped open automatically a good half-hour before the computer woke me up, and the shipboard air felt cold on my naked skin as I rose out of the device.

The passenger hold of the cutter was packed to the gills with hibernation chambers---necessary as the burden of carrying so many people conscious and breathing on a ship this small for this long would have overtaxed the command cutter's life support system---and I had to struggle to squeeze my way through the lines of open "coffins" to the recovery room. It would be a bit easier to get around once the artificial gravity cut off, but we were still in T-space, and military pilots have this thing about wanting to keep the gravity on "from jump to jump." It's kind of a superstition, I think.

There was only one other person in the recovery room when I stepped in...not surprisingly, it was Cowboy. He had already showered and was sitting on a dressing bench, pulling on one of the suits of byomer Reflex Armor from the combat lockers.

"Mornin', Cal." He waved to me with one hand, sealing the suit's fasteners around his neck with the other. "Have a nice nap?"

"Hell," I replied, grinning wryly, "I feel like I slept for a week."

I padded groggily into one of the 'fresher stalls, hit the controls on the inner wall, and was instantly bombarded by a fusillade of hot water. I closed my eyes and let the pounding shower massage the kinks out of my hibernation-tightened muscles, using the calming relaxation to review the details of the plan we were about to execute.

It wasn't too complicated. A pair of stealthships, not unlike the ones we'd piloted during the war, had probably already jumped insystem and were taking a careful look around. When the main assault force jumped in, the Scouts would signal us with a high-speed burst to our navigational computers that would send us on the correct course and also give us a good idea of how much opposition to expect.

The assault force was in four sections. At the lead were three full squadrons of Attack Command missile cutters, which would spread out to counter space-to-space threats and cover the ground forces; behind them were a pair of dropships, each carrying a platoon of battle-suited Marines. They would be dropped in to secure a landing area for the incursion force, who were in the last wave of Ranger stealthships, each carrying a company of powered-armor Ranger assault troops. The Rangers would actually penetrate the installation and attempt to secure it, while we---Kara, Cowboy, Secarius, Mat, myself, and three squads of Intell Special Ops commandos---would go in quietly ahead of them and try to find the evidence we needed before anyone could destroy it.

We were riding in a modified Ranger cutter---equipped with special, intelligence gathering devices and stealth projectors---right behind the dropships. If everything went according to plan, we'd be inserted simultaneously with the Ranger assault troops, and the confusion of their incursion would camouflage our entry.

We all realized, of course, that everything *never* goes according to plan.

I heard the door to the stall open, but I wasn't startled; I knew it was Kara before I felt her hands running across my back. I turned and she slipped silently into my arms, leaning up into a kiss that I was surprised to give so willingly. I had *thought* that I had sorted all this out. I'd filed away my relationship with her as a temporary, cathartic thing that I had put behind me with the revelation that Rachel was still alive.

After all, it hadn't been wrong, not before. I had believed my wife dead, and that belief had negated the vows I had taken. Now, since I knew there was a chance she was alive, everything was back the way it used to be. Wasn't it? Somehow, I couldn't think clearly about it with my tongue down her throat.

I broke the kiss and looked her in the eye. Soapy, warm water was streaming down from her short, brown hair and dripping off her nose. God, she was so beautiful.

"This is wrong," I said, swallowing hard.

"We could all be dead in a few hours," she told me. "If your Rachel's half the woman you've made her out to be, she wouldn't begrudge you a few minutes of happiness."

I should have argued, should have pushed her away...but all I could do was pull her to me and cover her mouth with mine. I ran my hands down the hard muscles of her back, caressing the smooth tightness of her buttocks. Grasping her by the backs of her thighs, I lifted her onto me, her legs wrapping around my waist as I entered her. A low hiss passed through her teeth and she threw her head back, offering her breasts to the attention of my mouth as we began to build a steady rhythm. All thoughts, all doubts were swept away by our quiet moans and washed clean in the deluge of heat that rained down on us.

I didn't know how all this would turn out, or what I would think of myself afterward, but at that moment all I knew was that I wanted her. I didn't believe this was love; I'm not sure if I *wanted* to believe I could love anyone but Rachel. Yet, at the same time, I knew it was something more than just physical passion.

I *needed* her, and I could feel that she needed me to be with her. Something about the moment, and the nearness of death, made us both want to cling dearly to life and to each other. We both knew that neither would likely last too long.

\* \* \*

I fidgeted in my acceleration couch, trying not to scratch at my collar. It had been a long time since I'd worn Reflex Armor, and the byomer felt odd against my skin. I tried to think about something else, glancing across the command bridge at the others strapped in around me.

Kara and Cowboy were on my flanks, while Mat and the Special

Ops section leader sat just behind the flight crew. Behind us, in a couch specially rigged for him, was the thing that had once been Robert Chang, the man I'd known as Cutter. I hadn't talked to him much since he'd arrived at Inferno; I'd been uncomfortable with him in his previous incarnation, and I was frankly repulsed by him now. Maybe he reminded me too much of myself.

"One minute to jump, Colonel M'voba," the pilot announced in muted tones. Everyone had been pretty subdued once they came out of stasis. Maybe they were just now realizing how risky this was going to be.

Mat nodded in reply to the announcement, face impassive. He could have been worrying about his monthly expense reports for all the anxiety he let show. I didn't know Major Parnell, the Special Ops commander, but he wore a worried expression on his business-like face.

Cowboy was whistling softly---a low, mournful tune that filled the bridge---while he idly twisted one end of his mustache. Secarius was motionless, his monstrous face unreadable, but I could have sworn he seemed positively happy.

Kara stared at the deactivated viewscreen, as if she were searching in its darkness for the end of this peculiar path upon which she'd been sent.

All I could think of was the way Rachel's hair fell into her eyes when we made love.

Reality exploded onto the viewscreen with a flash of polychromatic light and a wrench in my gut, and I immediately knew something was



wrong. Proximity alarms were blaring across the bridge before any of us had recovered from our post-jump disorientation, and I caught a brief glimpse of dozens of gleaming obelisks lined up across the forward screens before the viewers and everything else on the bridge went dark.

Everything was quiet for a moment, as the bridge crew did exactly what I was trying to do---tie into the ship's control net---and were just as unsuccessful. The main computer control system was down. That revelation spurred an explosion of sound and activity as the pilot and crew sprang into motion, activating auxiliary systems, one of them springing from her acceleration couch and launching herself out of the command center towards the emergency periscope.

I looked over at Kara, her face eerily lit by the dull red of the ship's emergency lights, and saw not the fear or surprise I expected, but rather anticipation. I had a sudden, uncanny feeling that this was not at all an unexpected turn of events for her, and I didn't quite know what to make of that.

Then I caught a glimpse of Cowboy, and a chill ran down my spine. He was *smiling*.

"Attention, Commonwealth ships!" A voice blared through the bridge's PA speakers, working despite the lack of power in any of the other systems, and the forward screens lit up with the image of one of the Predecessor aliens we had seen in the NewsNet holo on Murdock's ship. "We are representatives of the Resscharr Imperium," the creature announced in flawless Basic. "You have wrongfully invaded space granted to us by your government. Your vessels have been

neutralized, and will be towed by our sentry ships into orbit around our base at the planet you call Petra. There, all military personnel will be held for return to proper government authorities for prosecution.

"Do not resist and you will not be harmed."

The screens went dark again, and we all found ourselves staring at the dark space where the alien face had been. I had a vision of Rachel, locked in a room somewhere, waiting for me to come for her. With luck, maybe we'd end up in the same cell.

A gentle shudder went through the deckplates.

"We're being towed!" The crewman who'd gone to use the emergency periscope flew through the bridge access tunnel, slamming her shoulder against the bulkhead with a grunt. Her eyes were wide, their whites clearly visible as she steadied herself to keep from spinning end for end in the zero-g. "I don't know how...there's no cable or anything, just a kind of blue glow around us. But those ships---they're pulling us toward them."

It wasn't a full two minutes before a soft lurch went through the cutter as we docked with the Corporate ship, and I heard the distant, metallic grinding that told me we had matched airlocks.

"Sir?" Major Parnell turned to Mat with confusion and uncertainty in his expression. "What are your orders?"

"Just do as they say, for now, Major," Mat instructed him. "Tell your men not to resist." He turned to the pilot. "That goes for your bridge crew as well, Captain."

"Yes, sir," the man said, trying unsuccessfully to hide his relief at

the order.

I unstrapped from my acceleration couch and moved out through the access hatch, into the corridor, where I could see the main airlock. The minutes seemed to drag by as they matched pressures with us, but my attention was frozen on the bare metal of the lock door---I barely noticed when Kara and the others moved up behind me.

Then the hatch slowly hissed aside, and a tall, not-quite-human figure strode through with a scrape of magnetic soles. The Predecessor aliens had looked eerily haunting in the holos I had seen, and in Fourcade's memory, in what had amounted to civilian clothes. These things were positively nightmarish in gleaming black battle armor, with oddly-shaped weapons cradled threateningly in their long arms.

A half a dozen of them clomped through the hatch, spreading out up and down the corridor, before a human emerged, looking almost insignificant in his soft, grey-toned body armor. He lacked the magnetic boots of the Resscharr, and had to push against the bulkhead to bring himself in front of us, his right hand filled with a heavy pulse pistol.

"Who's in command here?" The short, battle-helmeted man demanded.

"I'm Colonel M'voba," Mat spoke up from somewhere over my right shoulder.

"I want all military personnel through that airlock in three minutes, Colonel," the man told him. "Anyone who tries to hide a

weapon will be stunned and put in restraints. Anyone who resists us will be killed where he stands."

"Major Parnell," M'voba ordered, "carry out those orders immediately."

"Yes, sir," Parnell acknowledged, still staring at the Resscharr.

Parnell moved his people and the bridge crew into the Corporate ship quickly and orderly, and followed them through after a quick salute to Mat.

"Good luck, Major," Mat called out before he disappeared into the airlock, followed by all but two of the guards.

Mat slowly turned and faced Cowboy.

"What are you planning on doing with us?" he asked matter-of-factly. I don't know why, but the impact of his words didn't immediately register with me; perhaps I was too wrapped up in my own troubles.

"Just what the alien fellah' said," Cowboy drawled, seeming totally relaxed. "The ordinary military personnel, including the Special Ops squad from this ship, will go back to the custody of the Patrol, where they'll face courtmartial. And, of course," he grinned with self-satisfaction, "a holo of all this will go to the Press as evidence of the disloyalty of the top military officers, who will be arrested immediately and replaced with appointees from President Jameson."

"And what about us?" Mat waved a hand at Kara, Secarius and me.

Then it hit me. It wasn't so much the realization that Cowboy had betrayed us---I'd never completely trusted him anyway. No, what smashed me between the eyes was the realization that Mat, and

possibly Kara as well, had *known* about this before-hand, and had stepped right into this trap with their eyes open.

"You folks are a special case," Cowboy answered. "We can't just let y'all go flyin' away free, knowin' what you know, but Mr. Damiani's not one to waste potential resources. He wants to offer y'all a deal." Mat just nodded.

A heat rose in my chest that burned through my limbs like acid, till my whole body was filled with a flaming hatred, a hatred far beyond the cold rage of the Machine. I wanted to scream, throw myself across the corridor and rip Cowboy's throat out, then take on the aliens. One thing stopped me: Secarius hadn't said a word or moved a muscle. If anyone was going to react violently to this---if there was anyone among us with truly nothing to lose---it was him. If he was keeping himself under control, there had to be a good reason.

I caught Kara's attention. Her eyes were bright, and she was licking her lower lip in a motion I'd come to know as one of excitement.

"Take it easy," she said. "Everything will be all right."

"Yeah, Cal," Cowboy assured me, in a tone surprisingly free of mockery, "your wife is fine, and you're about to see her. You probably won't believe this, but I'm doing all I can for you and Mat."

"I feel better now," I rasped, my throat tight with rage.

Ignoring me, he turned to the human commander of the alien troops.

"You can take your guards back on your ship," he told the man.

"Tow us into orbit, then cut us loose---I'll be taking her down myself."

"Are you sure, sir?" The man eyed us suspiciously.

"I can take care of myself, Mister," Cowboy snapped. "Tell Monsieur Damiani that I'll be bringing them directly to the research complex."

"Yes, sir!" The man went rigid. He turned and pushed himself through the airlock, taking the two remaining guards with him.

"Just how much did you get out of that base, Cowboy?" I asked him, realizing with a sick feeling that those landing pads I'd seen hadn't been empty at all.

"Not as much as we would have if y'all hadn't blown it up," he chuckled.

"You were there," Kara declared. "You killed that researcher so we couldn't question him."

"Had to," he shrugged. "Couldn't let you find out about Petra or our little science project. 'Course you found out anyway, but that was a bit beyond my reach."

He nudged himself back onto the bridge, strapping himself into the pilot's position, and the rest of us followed. We'd just taken our seats before the Corporate ship got under weigh with us in tow, the slight acceleration pressing us back into our couches.

"So Deke was telling the truth," I mumbled. "And we chased him away like he was a traitor."

"Don't feel too bad about it." Cowboy advised me. "He's out of all this now, and if he's smart, he'll run as far as he can. I'd hate to have to kill him."

"How did you keep finding us?" I had to know.

"You weren't too hard to figure out. It figured to me that you'd either go to Murdock or Deke for help, and I had teams out watching for both. When you went to Deke, I knew you weren't ready to bring it all to the brass, so I thought you'd be heading back to the Predecessor base. From there, the mole I had at Fleet Intell let me know where you'd be meeting Mat."

"Why did you have me attacked," Mat wanted to know, "and then save me from your own people?"

"He saved you?" I gaped at M'voba. "How long have you known that?"

"I knew I hadn't killed that DSI cadreman," Mat told me. "And there's only three kinds of people that can kill a cadreman one-on-one without a gun: another cadreman, a Tahni cyborg, and a Glory Boy."

"Believe it or not," Cowboy informed him, "I had nothing to do with the attempt on your life, Mat. The DSI has a sanction out on you." He turned to Kara and I. "And on both of you. I was heading out to follow you two when I got an alert from the station security system that there was an attack on Mat." Damn...he'd even penetrated that security system. I really should have tried bribing those guys.

"After I took out the fella that was on you, Mat," Cowboy went on, "I figured I'd make the best of it and try to use the confusion to insert myself into your confidences. I needed to know exactly when and where you'd be attacking if I was going to make sure I stopped you without having to kill the bunch of ya'."

"If you're so concerned about us," I interjected, "then why are you sticking with the Corporates on this? You sacrificed as much to

defend the Commonwealth as any of the rest of us."

"Cal, ol' buddy," he informed me quietly, "I've been working for the Corporate Council since before I entered the Service Academy."

"What?" Mat exclaimed, finally seeming surprised by something.

"I'd heard of people like you," said Secarius, speaking for the first time. "The DSI," he addressed the rest of us, "had a closer relationship to the Council than the rest of the military, so we were privy to more of the rumors that floated around during the war."

"I'd heard that the Council had recruited some young men and women to enter the Academy and serve as information sources. The Council was concerned that the military would discover some new technologies or resources and the government would try to squeeze the corporations out of it after the war."

"But they couldn't have known you'd be on the *Thatcher*," Mat insisted.

"That made things a mite complicated," he admitted. "It was hard to get a hold of the established contacts---you know how close they watched us when we were off-duty. But during the invasion of Tahn-Skyiiah, I talked to a DSI agent who was another of the moles, and they gave me a new deal based on my position." He smiled broadly, hesitating for effect. "For the last six years, I've been the Chief of Security for the Corporate Executive Board."



## Chapter Fifteen

Petra drifted by our viewscreens, a craggy landscape, pitted by countless meteor impacts and coated with a thin layer of ice that gleamed in the light of the faraway primary. West piloted wordlessly through the thin atmosphere, caught up in the stunned silence that had fallen upon us all with his revelation and lasted through the hours it had taken us to reach the planet.

I gave no thought to trying to take over the ship---I was sure they were keeping us under observation, and they'd already demonstrated the ability to disable our systems from a distance. No, if there was to be any resistance, it would have to come once we landed and I had an idea of where Rachel was.

I kept finding myself staring at Mat. He had suspected Cowboy, yet he had allowed us to fall into this trap. If he had something planned, it was incomprehensible to me...unless it was a suicide attack.

Yeah, I realized, that might make more sense. He and General Murdock could have figured that the Corporates would have us outgunned, and planned on being captured and trying to take out this Damiani guy. Of course, it would be damned impolite of them not to inform the rest of us about it.

If that was the case, I would have to consider going along with the Corporates if they offered me the chance. As much as the thought repelled me, I owed it to Rachel to do everything I could to keep her alive.

I could feel the cutter decelerating as we approached the impact-cut lines of a huge lake, framed by the sheer cliffs of the crater. Glassy waves lapped gently at the frozen shore, blown by a soft breeze, and in the middle of it all was an island of dull metal.

"There she is," Cowboy commented softly. "Home sweet home."

As he brought us in lower, feeding power to the belly thrusters, I got a better look at the base. It was a framework of duralloy girders floating on broad pontoons, supporting a massive, heavily-armored habitat dome at least five hundred meters across. Next to the dome was an open landing platform, empty but for a pair of small, atmospheric flyers.

This, I assumed, was only the operational headquarters of the Corporate outpost here. As big as the dome was, there wasn't room in it for a fusion torch or reactor of the size needed for a true research facility. I knew they had an orbital complex, and I guessed there was probably an underground facility as well.

The cutter rumbled and shook as she came down on jets of plasma fire, polishing the graphite landing pad beneath us to a mirror finish. We set down on the landing struts with a gentle bump as Cowboy cut power to the engines.

"All right." He turned in his couch after shutting down the board. "Lest any of y'all get any smart ideas while we're transferring to the dome, let me fill you in about our surroundings." He squinted at the view on the main screens, past the boxy docking tractor that was crawling toward us.

"Now, it's a nice summer day out there, so it should be pretty near

a hundred below in the sun. Air's about a tenth of an Atmosphere of chlorine, lake down there's hydrochloric acid and so's the snow, when we get it. Without a hard vacc suit, a Norm'd last about ten seconds." He smiled. "Y'all bein' special folk, I might give you up to a minute. That'd give the rest of us time to make bets on what'll get you first...suffocation, freezin' to death, or having the chlorine eat through your lung tissue."

"How charming," Secarius commented drily. "Perhaps I'll purchase a summer home here."

A metallic grinding echoed through the hull as the transfer tractor matched airlocks with the cutter, followed by the hiss of inrushing air. Cowboy came to his feet.

"Time," he announced, "to meet the host."

The dome had an unfinished air to it, with low-hanging girders and framework exposed above the walkway and workers still assembling equipment in the unfinished walls. We filed through a series of narrow walkways, passing the odd guard or maintenance worker and a host of construction 'bots, until we came to the entrance to a suite of offices.

A pair of guards blocked the doorway with pulse carbines---a quick thermal scan revealed them as being of the same Executive Bodyguard Deke had faced at the Predecessor base---but they parted to allow us through. We strode through the outer room, past a half-dozen netridders plugged into their terminals, and into the main chamber. There, posed dramatically in front of a real wood desk, was a slim, dark-haired man of medium build. Dressed in an immaculate, hand-

tailored business suit, he seemed even more elegant than his clothes, with not a hair out of place or a blemish on his perfect face.

This, I knew, was Andre Damiani, the most powerful man in the Commonwealth.

So caught up was I in looking him over, I almost didn't notice the huge figure hulking behind him, standing against the wall. He was a Tahni, but that wasn't so strange---there were Tahni everywhere throughout the Commonwealth, since the war and the Reconciliation. But my headcomp kept buzzing in my ear, trying to tell me something, so I ran a thermal scan on him...and almost fell over. Underneath that biological skin was a skeleton of solid alloy, dotted with the gleaming stars of isotope power packs. He was an Imperial Guard cyborg.

Suddenly, I wasn't on Petra anymore; I was on Tahn-Skyyiah, and it was the waning weeks of the war. All of us had been sent in concurrently with the first Marine troops to disrupt the Tahni power supply, command structure and lines of communication, and to try to prevent them from doing a "scorched-earth" maneuver on us.

I had been sent to the largest power plant in the Imperial City to disable the reactor and insure that it couldn't be set to explode if they thought it was hopeless. I got past the regular troops and technicians without a problem, but I hadn't known they had a Guard 'borg watching the place. He came out of the shadows wearing Stealth armor that masked his thermal signature, and knocked my pistol out of my hand before I got a chance to use it.

I came closer to dying fighting that God-forsaken, soulless piece of junk than I had any other time during the war. We beat the living shit

out of each other, and I only managed to get the best of him by a moment of pure luck.

I'd heard some of them had survived, but I sure as hell never expected to see one.

"Good afternoon, my friends," Damiani welcomed us in cordial tones. A brief frown passed over his face and he glanced at West. "It is afternoon out there, isn't it, Roger?"

"All I know's that it's cold, sir," Cowboy said, grinning ruefully.

"You all know who I am," Damiani went on, "so I won't bother introducing myself. This," he waved a hand back at the cyborg, "is my personal bodyguard, Trint. Trint has been most useful to me over the last few years, for which I am most thankful to Monsieur West, who brought him to me. And now he has brought you before me, who may even prove more useful.

"I am not a wasteful man, nor am I a spiteful one. You have all cost me much in the way of time and inconvenience, not to mention," he eyed me significantly, "the destruction of property. Yet I seek no revenge. Revenge is for small minds."

He paced closer to us, looking Mat and I over. "Yet I know that you perceive us to be on opposite sides. You may even cling to archaic notions that I and those I represent are..." he chuckled pleasantly, "*evil*. Let me assure you, our motives are economical rather than diabolical."

"Tell that to those colonists on Grenada," Mat said quietly.

"Oh, Colonel M'voba," Damiani said with a pleasant laugh, "you don't believe we really expended the time and energy to actually

destroy that colony, do you? As I said, I'm not a wasteful man. It was much easier to simply synthesize a holo for the news and restrict all traffic in and out of the system."

"If that's so," I said, slowly mulling all this over, "then the President's in on the whole thing, right?"

"Jameson's a halfway talented actor, Mr. Mitchell," Damiani sniffed disdainfully. "He's such an automaton, I'm surprised he can perform bodily functions without guidance. You are standing before the only true president the Commonwealth has had for the last thirty years."

"Is that supposed to make us trust you?" Kara asked him.

"Nothing so maudlin, my dear Captain," he replied. "If you're half as intelligent as my experience has led me to believe, it will convince you of how futile it is to oppose my efforts. My father ran this government before me, and when I choose to lay down the reins of command..." He paused, chuckling to himself. "Well, my tastes run differently; but perhaps I'll use the technology we've acquired to make a genetic duplicate of myself...for posterity, as it were. In any case, even if you were fortunate enough to dispose of me, what I've built would continue in my absence. If you join me, however, we could, together, build something greater than the sum of our parts."

"Mr. Damiani," I interrupted, "This is all very persuasive, but, if you don't mind, I'd like to see my wife."

"Your wife *is* a charming woman, Mr. Mitchell. I would say that you were a fortunate man, but from what you've managed to survive in the last few weeks, it's obvious you're absolutely blessed." He smiled. "She's fine, I assure you. We'll be visiting her in just a while.

But first, I think it would help impress upon all of you just what you're up against if we were to take you on a tour of our little facility. If you would lead the way, Roger..."

"Yeah, sure," Cowboy jerked his head toward the door, looking a bit unhappy at being our tour guide. He led us out of the room, with Damiani behind and the Executive Guards bringing up the rear to assure our good behavior.

We passed through another section of unfinished corridors before we came to what appeared to be a large lift station. West hit a control and the door to one of the cars opened for us.

"Where's this supposed to take us?" I wanted to know. "This whole place is floating on a lake of hydrochloric acid, right?"

"Right," Cowboy allowed as we filed into the car. "This takes us under the lake."

"Oh, good." I rolled my eyes, wishing I hadn't asked.

The door closed, and I felt the car begin to move downward.

"The dome is a recent addition," Damiani explained. "Built more for comfort than anything else. The main part of this base was constructed before the war, beneath the lake, away from the prying sensors of Trint's former employers. It became a handy location for us to continue our research into genetic reconstruction.

"Now, however, we no longer have to worry about drawing attention to our activities, and our priority has changed to creating a viable base of operations for the next stage of our little venture."

"Just what is the next stage?" Mat asked him. "We've figured out that you mean to use the contrived threat of the Skrela to put

Corporate Security Forces in control of the colonies, but just how do you plan to explain to the public when their Fleet disappears?"

"People are sheep, Colonel M'voba," Damiani declared. "You, if anyone, should know that. You give them a well-produced ViRfeed and a convincing story, and they'll believe just about anything. It's been the same for all recorded history." The Corporate executive seemed to be winding up for a boardroom speech, and he continued as the lift came to a halt. "The Egyptians believed their pharaohs were living gods. The citizens of Rome were convinced that their empire was eternal, right up to the point the Goths and Vandals stormed the Eternal City. Good Lord, the people of the old United States actually believed that John F. Kennedy was killed by a lone sociopath!" We trailed West out of the car, following him through hallways tinted an antiseptic white, technicians drifting by us dressed in labcoats of a similar color.

"But we have no plans of 'disappearing' the Fleet, Colonel M'voba...we never did. This base, aside from its other, obvious functions, was a Judas goat. We knew once Cowboy revealed its location to you, that you would be drawn to it inexorably. Your abortive raid has effectively exposed all the disloyal elements in the upper echelons of the military, and given our puppets an excuse to depose them without undue public outcry." Our little tour group went through a wagon-wheel intersection, curving to the right past a row of large laboratories, exposed to the hallway through thick transplas. I glanced into one of them, saw the bodies of adult Resscharr floating in clear chambers of biotic fluid. An involuntary shudder ran up my



back.

"No," Damiani went on, every pore emanating satisfaction, "our fleet will achieve an impressive victory with the aid of our new allies. Not without losses, to be sure, but they will return as heroes."

"How do you expect to pull that off?" Kara demanded. "If you mean to maintain control, you'll have to maintain the threat. Do you think you can do that indefinitely with no real enemies to show the public?"

"Oh, we'll have enemies for them, Captain McIntire," Damiani assured her. "Enemies you'll have to see to believe."

Cowboy paused before the door into the suite of labs, letting its security seal scan his retina. The heavy portal slid aside with a hermetic hiss, and he looked back at the rest of us.

"In here."

"Mother of God," Kara muttered. I didn't agree. Whatever force had spawned the creature before us, it was nothing so benevolent.

The Skrela warrior had looked formidable on the holo we had seen, but in person it scared the living shit out of me, even contained in the transplas vat. It was a mass of chitinous armor plates and oversized pincers, bobbing thoughtlessly in the pink biotic fluid. The vat was at least three times the size of the ones in which we had seen them growing the Resscharr, and it seemed to fill the room, barely leaving enough space for us and the banks of equipment that monitored it.

"How?" Secarius asked, speaking for the first time since we'd landed on the planet. "How could you create that without at least a

DNA sample?"

"What?" Damiani cocked an eyebrow. "You assumed the Skrela were merely an invention we created to aid our cause? Not that I blame you, mind...the things are almost too nightmarish to be real. But they were. The history that our biological creations gave on the NewsNet was essentially correct up till the contrived return of both the Ancients and their enemies. This," he gestured at the construct, "was produced from the remains of one of the creatures that the Resscharr kept preserved for study on their outpost."

"There's the answer to your question," Cowboy told Kara, who was still staring at the thing. "The public will believe us because we'll *have* an enemy they can see. Hell, they'll have an enemy that'll haunt their fucking dreams."

"Now, perhaps you can see your position," Damiani said. "If you're hoping that General Murdock or his allies will expose us, don't. He and his friends will be under arrest within a month. Their stories, should they even be heard, won't be believed once the Senate and the public get an eyeful of our new enemies."

"They have no choice, nor could I allow them one...they are too high profile to be allowed a chance to do further harm. You, on the other hand, *have* a choice. You can join the winning side. You, Colonel M'voba, could replace General Murdock as the head of Fleet Intelligence. Captain McIntire, I could have you installed as the new Director of the DSI---it seems the current Director," the Corporate executive said with a thin smile, "is fated to meet with a mysterious accident."

He looked up at Secarius thoughtfully. "Monsieur Chang, I'm not completely sure as yet what position you would fill, but one of your unique physical and technical abilities would surely prove valuable."

"What about me, Damiani?" I asked him. "What's Mephistopheles offering me for *my* soul?"

"I do admire a man with a classical education." he said, applauding appreciatively. "But I assumed you already knew what I was offering...the life of your lovely wife, Rachel. And *your* life, Constable Mitchell. Not just your metaphysical life, mind...you've already shown a willingness to part with that. No, I refer to the life you've so longed for, the one that you feel the Corporate Council has robbed from you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I frowned. This was weird...it was as if Damiani was walking inside my guts, picking out pieces to dredge up and show around.

"If you will agree to remain in my service for the next five years as an assistant to Roger West, I will pull all the Corporate presence off of Canaan, including the mines and the orbital reflectors. Think about it, Caleb," he urged, his face becoming almost gentle. "For the rest of your life, you and your family can have that pristine little world all your own, with no outside interference. God, it's almost appealing to *me*."

"And if I refuse?" I asked, stalling for time to think. I felt like I was walking through a dream, unable to separate fact from fantasy. Was what he was offering really that bad? Was he---and were the Corporates---really the murderous monsters that I had thought them to be, or were they just like any other big business conglomerate or

government bureaucracy through the last few hundred years? Maybe I was just fooling myself thinking I could change the way things had always been...

"You'll be tried for the murder of some four hundred CSF employees aboard the Canaan orbital station," he told me, "and most likely executed."

"What about Rachel?" I rasped hoarsely, my words nearly catching in my throat. Four hundred people...

"She'll never leave this base." He didn't have to add that implied last word: "alive."

"I don't suppose," Kara interjected, "we have any time to consider all this."

"Of course," the executive acquiesced easily. "I'm not an unreasonable man. At a brisk walk, it will take us about seven minutes to make it back to my office." He smiled that smooth, almost-likable smile of his. "Think fast."

As we made our way out of the labs and back toward the lift banks, all I could hear were my words to Kara back on Inferno: "Kind of makes you not want to bother trying to stop them." She'd reminded me that if we didn't, they'd kill us. Now, perhaps, those weren't our only options.

I'd never considered myself an idealist, not since the war. Oh, once I'd entertained thoughts of self-sacrifice and loyalty to the Commonwealth---those kind of youthful convictions had gotten me into the Academy when it would have been much easier to stay on the farm. But I'd seen enough moral compromise in the name of military

or political pragmatism to realize that, however far mankind had progressed technologically, he'd hardly advanced a centimeter ethically.

The idea of a truly representative government on an interstellar scale was a joke. Whenever more than a few million people got together and called themselves a society, one or a few of them was going to wind up bossing the others around, no matter what fancy names they gave it. So I didn't believe for a moment that I had a duty to free humanity from the yoke of its corporate tyrants and restore the rightful rule of the duly-elected Commonwealth government. Hell, it was that duly-elected bunch of morons who'd let all this happen in the first place.

No, the only duty I recognized was to my family, and, by extension, to the place we called home. If I could redeem that home from the depredations of the Corporate Presence, it would be worth the deal I'd be making with this particular incarnation of the Devil. The only question was if he was telling the truth. That's the shitty part about deals with the Devil---it's hard to trust somebody with that kind of track record.

The lift doors closed us in with a sibilant hiss, appropriate to the Hellish allegory I'd built up in my mind, and I let my gaze drift to Kara. What was she going to do in the face of this temptation? Above all else, she was a pragmatist; yet, above even that, she was not one to trust the Corporates. I wished I could risk a neurolinked word with her, but I suspected that, here, even that would be detected.

She returned my look with a calm, unreadable stare, but I saw her

flex her left hand slightly, perhaps wishing she could shoot her way out of this with that little laser. Even if Cowboy hadn't drained it back on the ship, however, I doubt we could have gotten far. We all retained our Reflex Armor, and our non-powered implant weapons, but the complex was crawling with Executive Guards, and the one available starship was across too many meters of chlorine gas.

I caught myself wishing that the two of us had met under different circumstances, but that was patently ridiculous. Under any other circumstances, I'd never have considered being with any woman but Rachel.

What was that old saying Elder Pratt had always quoted to my father when they were both a little drunk? Oh, yeah..."Shit happens." That was it.

The lift came to an abrupt halt, and the doors opened, putting an end to my considerations. We filed out, with Damiani in the lead and the Executive Guards bringing up the rear. Mat was in front of me and West was at my elbow, while Kara and Secarius kept pace with each other just in front of the Guards.

When it happened, it caught me by surprise, though it shouldn't have. We were moving through the uncompleted section of the dome, and the Guards were holding their carbines loosely, lulled into a false security by our acquiescence. West's eyes were ahead of us, and I saw behind them something of the discomfort I sensed he was having with all of this. Damiani seemed to be glowing with the triumph he felt was near.

Then, hearing a grunt of surprise from one of the guards, I turned

and saw that Secarius was gone.

"In the ceiling!" One of the guards shouted, both of them swinging their weapons upward, to where the former street surgeon had used his tail to snag an overhanging beam and swing into the dark recesses between the foundation of the floor above us and the framework for the ceiling.

Before either of them could get off a shot, Kara and Mat slammed into them, smashing the guards against the wall, then dashing down the corridor. I only hesitated a heartbeat, the thought that I still didn't know where Rachel was uppermost in my mind, but it was long enough for Cowboy to pull his sidearm and jam it into my back.

All I could do was watch as the Guards recovered their fallen carbines and took off after my friends, disappearing around the corner.

"I'm broadcasting a full-station alert," Cowboy told Damiani, whose satisfied glow had transformed into a mask of displeasure. "They won't get far."

"I wouldn't count on that too heavily," I warned, putting a bite into my tone. I glanced meaningfully at West. "At least I know whose job *I'll* be taking over."

"Shut up," Cowboy snarled, jabbing me with the barrel of his rocket pistol.

"Control yourself, Roger," Damiani cautioned him. "This little setback was your responsibility, and I expect you to clean it up."

Another group of Executive Guards came running up to us, trailed by Trint, who seemed to tower over the others. "Find them," the

Executive Director ordered West, gesturing emphatically down the corridor. "Especially that monstrosity."

"And when I find them?" Cowboy asked him, his mouth a hard line.

"They've made their decision," he said, his eyes on me. "Kill them...except for the woman. Bring her to my private office." West locked eyes defiantly with the man for a moment, but finally nodded and turned to the half-dozen Executive Guards.

"All but two of you come with me," he snapped, leading them away at a brisk trot.

"And what about me?" I wanted to know.

"Why, Constable Mitchell," he said, seemingly once more the picture of control, "I'm taking you exactly where you want to go---to see your wife."



## Interlude: Rachel

Rachel snapped out each punch and kick of the *poomse* with an explosive grunt of exertion, picturing her fists and feet impacting on hordes of grey-clad CSF mercs. She'd practiced every day of the last month, trying to recall the lessons she'd been given by Cal during and after the War. Perhaps she was kidding herself, thinking she could overcome any of her armed captors using barely-remembered Tae Kwan Do techniques, but it was better than sitting on her ass.

She finished the complex form and paused to take a drink of water and run a sweat towel over her neck before continuing to the next level of *poom-se*. She could still picture the first time Cal had tried to show her unarmed combat techniques...it had been shortly after he'd landed on Canaan during the Occupation.

They'd been awkward with each other at first---so much had happened since they'd been teenage lovers, and they'd become different people. But she'd found herself attracted to the new sense of confident purpose Cal had found in his years in the service, and even attracted to the pain she saw behind his eyes. It matched a like pain inside her, a hollow in her soul caused by the death of her husband and daughter during the invasion.

She could barely remember their faces anymore. She hadn't felt any survivor's guilt, or even experienced the grief she'd expected. All she'd allowed herself to feel in the months after their deaths was hate, but Caleb had helped her to unlock the part of herself she'd banished

in her desire for revenge. She believed she'd done the same for him as well. She didn't think about Harry and Angela too much...but in the years she and Cal had been together since the War, she had gently but firmly rebuffed any suggestion of having another child. Losing one had very nearly shut off a part of her psyche---she didn't want to think about the possibility of losing another.

She'd supported Cal when he'd had to physically fight his older brother for the leadership of the Resistance, but they were still hesitant with each other...until she'd come to his shelter to ask him to teach her some of the martial arts moves he'd used on Isaac. They'd begun with a few basic kicks, punches and blocks, and had gotten no further that Sleep Period because they'd wound up making love. Later, when he'd returned after the end of the War and accepted the job of Constable, he had showed her the forms he'd learned at the Academy, and she had practiced for a while before losing interest. Now, she wished she'd been more faithful at it.

Sighing softly, she dropped into her stance and began the next form, a complicated black belt maneuver.

She was in the middle of a spinning round kick when the cell door hissed open and Trint stepped in. She fought to keep from stumbling as she arrested her motion and came to a halt facing him, the ever-present question in her eyes: Is this it?

Trint nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Your husband is here, Mrs. Mitchell," he announced in a neutral tone.

A thrill went through her, a surge of hope that she hadn't felt in

the weeks she'd been imprisoned, but she fought to keep herself under control. She nodded, stopping to wipe her face before following the Tahni out of the door. It was, she realized, the first time she'd left the cell since she'd arrived.

They made their way through a spacious anteroom filled with monitoring equipment, out into a narrow corridor that led a gently curving path around the complex. Rachel felt like a tourist, eyes darting here and there to try to take in as much of her surroundings as possible on her short journey. Most of the personnel she saw were technicians and workers assembling equipment or putting the finishing touches on the walls or ceiling---the place seemed to be still under construction.

She didn't notice a lot of guards, but those that were visible seemed a higher quality than the usual CSF hired guns. Suddenly, her martial arts practice seemed even more inadequate than before.

The halls began to widen as they entered a more completed section of the dome and, as they rounded a corner, she saw that they were approaching the double-wide doorway of a spacious maintenance bay.

"Wait for my move," Trint instructed her softly before they stepped into the chamber.

Standing in the center of the main bay was Cal. He was dressed in some kind of camouflaged combat suit and seemed unharmed, but the look on his face was one she'd never seen there before---almost one of surrender. When he saw her enter, a new light came into his eyes, as if a load were lifted from his shoulders, and he drew in a relieved breath.

"Oh, God," she sobbed, taking a step toward him. One of the Executive Guards stepped forward to block her way, but Damiani shook his head and the woman let her pass.

Rachel ran into his embrace, kissing him with all the passion and desperation she'd kept bottled inside her for the past months. She felt herself being lifted off the ground as he pressed her close against him and her arms tightened around his neck. All she wanted to do was hold him, to hold him for as long as she'd been separated from him. But there was something else she had to do.

"Watch for Trint's move," she whispered to him, softly enough, she hoped, to avoid being heard by the hyper-sensitive hearing of those around her. He gave no reply, but she could feel him stiffen slightly in her grasp.

"Enough," Damiani snapped, tiring of the maudlin exchange. Rachel's head snapped around at him, wondering if he'd somehow heard her, but he just motioned her back toward Trint.

She paused to kiss her husband softly before sliding away from him and moving across the chamber to where the Tahni cyborg waited.

"Are you all right, honey?" Cal asked her, swallowing hard, lines of worry evident in his face.

"She's fine," Damiani interrupted impatiently, sitting on the edge of a work table, hands clasped in his lap. "The time, however, is come for your decision, my dear Monsieur Mitchell." He gave the name a French flourish, an affectation Rachel found rather pretentious from a man who Trint told her had grown up in orbit, speaking unaccented English.

In fact, though she hadn't met the Executive Director in person up to this point, she found his whole demeanor pretentious, as if he'd constructed his personality to impress others rather than from any internal motivation. He seemed, more than anything else, like a computer construct in a ViRdrama.

Cal started to open his mouth, but Andre held up a hand.

"Don't bother to avow your loyalty, please," he cautioned. "I've always believed in the old axiom that actions speak louder, but I have taken the liberty of arranging an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you are, indeed, willing to work with us."

Damiani's eyes seemed to glaze slightly, and Rachel guessed he was communicating with someone on a neurolink---she had seen Cal do the same thing before. Shuffling footsteps from behind them caused her to turn and face the room's entrance. Looming shadows shrank into the long-limbed form of a man, wearing the same kind of combat suit as Caleb, his hand filled with a big, skeleton-framed handgun.

It took her a moment---the hair was longer, the mustache bushier than she remembered---but she recognized the man as Roger West, one of Cal's teammates from the War, the one Trint had identified as the traitor. Behind him, held at gunpoint by a pair of guards, a trickle of blood running from a cut on her forehead, was Kara McIntire.

## Chapter Sixteen

"Ran smack into one of our security stunners," I heard Cowboy announce smugly, over the sinking feeling on my stomach.

"I'll be okay," Kara said in answer to the question she must have seen in my eyes. "They...they killed Mat, Cal."

I fought back an agonized moan, feeling as if she'd punched me but not wanting to let Damiani see it. Things were falling apart, every opportunity to get out of this slipping away.

"Strip off her armor," Damiani ordered. I glanced at him sharply, heat travelling up the back of my neck, wondering just what the hell he was up to.

With West's gun on her, two of the Executive Guards worked at the fastenings of her combat suit, pulling it off of her roughly, leaving her clad only in a cut-off tank top and panties. She seemed so vulnerable, standing almost naked in the midst of the enemy, but her expression remained hard and defiant.

"This isn't necessary." I turned on Andre, trying to keep the anger out of my voice. "I'll do what you want."

Damiani shook his head. "You're a man with too much of a conscience for your own good, Constable. For me to trust your conversion, we're going to have to sear that conscience with a hot iron." The man chuckled at the Biblical reference. He turned to the Guards. "Put her in the airlock."

"No!" I blurted, starting to surge forward, but Damiani nodded to

Trint, who grabbed Rachel and put his hand threateningly close to her neck.

I froze in mid-step. Despite what Rachel had whispered to me, one flick of the Tahni's wrist could snap her neck. One of the Guards hit the controls to the maintenance airlock, opening the inner hatch with a metallic rasp, and the other shoved Kara inside. The door ground closed, but Kara's face was still visible through the small porthole in the inner lock door.

"Now," Damiani continued, sliding off the table and pacing past Rachel, coming almost nose-to-nose with me, "you probably know that the atmosphere outside this dome isn't the most hospitable---Captain McIntire would probably last two to three minutes in it. It won't be a quick or pleasant death. I'm giving you a choice. You can go over to the airlock and cycle her out of it, or I will have Trint here break your lovely wife's neck."

Time froze for me in the seconds after Damiani spoke those words. Up till that point, I'd dared to think that there might be a way out of this for us, that I could buy our lives with the sacrifice of my conscience. Now, I knew that nothing less than my life would suffice.

I guess I should have been grateful to her and the others for forcing me into it, for "saving my soul," but instead I was vaguely pissed...we'd been so close to coming out of it all alive.

I took one last, long look at Rachel. God, I loved her. I wanted to tell her I was sorry for all this---sorry that I'd taken her from the only life she'd ever wanted, to get her killed out here so far from home. But I couldn't say it now.

My gaze went from her to the airlock port, to Kara's face, which was pressed up against it. What a Goddamned mess. I wished I could tell her I was sorry, too---sorry we couldn't have met fifteen years ago and given this some more attention. But I couldn't say that, either.

All I could do was wonder just what this Trint was supposed to do.



## Interlude: Trint

This was the time. He didn't know what contingency plans Rachel's husband might have, but he couldn't wait any longer---it was now or never. One hand still on Rachel Mitchell's throat, he used the other to reach into his left utility pocket and activate the jamming device he had built.

Much as he wanted to kill Damiani, he had to take out West first---the ex-commando was the most serious threat. He'd have to trust to Constable Mitchell to handle the Guards and Damiani.

If it worked...it had to work. He had been a slave for too long.

He moved. Rachel Mitchell fell startled to the floor as he let go of her and launched himself across the room at Roger West. Nearly a decade of frustration, humiliation and rage fueled the attack that the Tahni launched on West, and it was much more than the human was prepared for. Trint connected with three devastating shots that threw Cowboy halfway across the room before the ex-Glory Boy managed to extend his talons.

In a sentient fury unlike any he'd ever permitted himself before, Trint nearly forgot about Damiani and the implant bomb. His purpose---his very existence---had become the killing of the man who had brought him to this life of slavery.

West finally got his feet beneath him and lashed into the cyborg with his implant blades, sending strips of grey cloth and spatters of blood flying. The superficial damage did little to deter Trint,

however, who responded with a leaping kick that could have crushed in the human's head. Cowboy managed to fall beneath it and the thunderous blow slammed into the reinforced duralloy wall, ringing off of it like a cathedral bell.

The ex-commando scrambled away, and Trint lost him for a moment in the throng of flailing bodies that filled the bay. Spinning around toward the airlock, the Tahni cyborg saw Rachel Mitchell locked in a struggle with Andre Damiani, trying to keep him away from the control panel. Even as he watched, the Council Executive got inside her guard and delivered a palm-heel strike beneath her chin. The woman collapsed backwards, and Damiani turned, reaching the airlock controls.

Forgetting West, the cyborg surged forward, so intent on stopping Damiani from killing the McIntire woman that he didn't see West rising from his crouch with his rocket pistol in his hand...

"Trint!" she screamed.

The cyborg spun around at her cry, just as West fired, altering the impact that would have taken off the Tahni's head. A pale trail of smoke connected the barrel of the handgun with Trint's torso for a split second, and then there was the sharp crack of an explosion and the bitter tang of ozone as a puff of flame blossomed on the cyborg's chest. He flew back into the rear wall, and slumped motionless.

Rachel felt the wisp of hope she'd sheltered beginning to slip away, and looked around her with a sense of utter helplessness. Cal had put down one of the Guards, but was still entangled with the second, and Roger West was bringing his gun around toward him. Damiani

hesitated in front of the airlock controls for just a moment, looking into Kara's eyes and smiling cruelly. Then he hit the button to open the outer hatch.

## Chapter Seventeen

I'd been watching, but I was still almost caught flatfooted when the cyborg moved. Still, old instincts---and old programming---die hard, and when Trint's hand came off of Rachel's neck, I was heading for the airlock. I had to free Kara, not only for her safety but to increase our odds of winning this fight.

I had nearly the perfect opportunity---the Executive Guards were torn for a moment between stopping me or going to the aid of Roger West, and that fraction of a second was all I needed to cross the distance to the airlock. The only thing between me and the controls was Andre Damiani.

I don't know where he got the gun. I hadn't detected it on him before, but I suppose someone with that much money could have an undetectable weapon. In the half-breath I had to examine it as he brought it up, I concluded it was a laser, and I was fairly sure it wouldn't penetrate the Reflex Armor I still wore. Unfortunately, I wasn't wearing any armor on my head, which was exactly where he was aiming.

I threw my arms over my face and barreled blindly into him, just as the weapon went off. Heat washed across my arms and face, and I felt what was likely a nasty burn across my left forearm before we tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs. I found the barrel of the pistol with my right hand and jerked it from his grasp, slamming his head back with a forearm to free me from his thrashings.

I surged to my feet, reaching for the controls, but the delay had allowed the Guards time to prioritize, and they opened fire on me before I'd straightened up. That was probably what saved my life: they had aimed high to avoid hitting Damiani, who was also getting up from the floor, and the fusillade of pulses impacted on the wall behind me.

I didn't bother trying to take the Guards out with my appropriated handgun---it wouldn't have gone through their armor any more than it would have mine---but there *was* a target for the little pistol. I dropped to one knee behind the rising Council Director and fired two quick bursts, targeting the curved magazines of their pulse carbines. The crimson threads intersected the thermoplastic boxes, igniting in each the hyperexplosive lasing cartridges and blowing the carbines apart in a shower of sparks.

Both of the Guards tossed away the useless weapons and rushed me, serrated sabres extending from housings on either sides of their forearms. Sweeping Damiani's legs from beneath him, I extended my talons with a thought and launched myself into the two Elite Bodyguards. I wished I'd had time to finish that arrogant bastard, but if I let those Guards get an edge on me, I'd be too dead to appreciate it. I hoped maybe Rachel would think to let Kara loose, because it looked like I was going to be otherwise occupied. These Elite Bodyguards were tough motherfuckers, and I had *two* of them to deal with, both wearing the same Reflex Armor as me.

It was all I could do to keep both of them engaged, but I did have one advantage---they were so close in with me that they had to worry

about tagging each other by mistake, while I could strike at anything within reach. I pressed that tactical edge, buzz-sawing my talons in a vertical oval pattern that I'd been taught back in Glory Boy training, slicing off a couple of fingers before the bodyguards backed off, the male of the pair biting out a curse at the sight of his mangled hand.

I used the momentary respite to risk a scan of the room, and what my auxiliary sensors read told me that Trint and Rachel were having their share of problems. Rachel was down, Damiani was heading for the airlock, Trint was trying to stop Damiani and Cowboy was going for his gun...

"Trint!" I heard Rachel scream, just as Cowboy fired.

When the gun went off, it startled me, but not as badly as it did my opponents---one of them actually flinched. It was just a fraction of a second, but it was all I needed. I put one of my right-hand talons through the man's eye and into his brain, fending off his partner with a side-kick to give me the time to pull the blade out and let him collapse.

Now, things were a bit brighter. The other Guard was a female of Earth extraction, and, while she'd had extensive augmentation, I still had an edge on her with upper-body strength, as well as in the sophistication of my headcomp. She knew it, too, and began immediately backing off to get some more breathing room.

That was when I saw Damiani going for the airlock controls. I braced myself to make a jump at him, but my opponent saw my distraction and came at me from my blind side. I managed to brush aside her blade attack, but she pulled me into a close-in grappling

fight, trying to get a leg behind mine to sweep me. Desperate to stop Damiani from getting to the controls, I fed myself a double-dose of adrenaline and used the sudden surge of strength to lock her arms straight out just long enough to slam my forehead into the bridge of her nose.

Luckily for me, my opponent had received the usual, cut-rate bone lamination treatment with wraparound strips of polymer instead of the byomer bonding I'd been treated to. The larger bones of her skull and face had been hardened, but the smaller more fragile nasal process had gone untouched; the bone shattered with an audible crunch and one of the longer splinters was driven directly into her brain.

I spun around, letting her drop, but I was already too late. Rachel was still on one knee in the middle of struggling back to her feet; Trint was flat on his back with an ugly hole through the center of his chest revealing a charred mass of bloody flesh, ceramic and metal; Cowboy had tracked his rocket pistol over to cover me, his face grim and bloodied; and Damiani was leaning breathlessly against the back wall, facing away from the lock and toward us, grinning with satisfaction.

Behind him, the flashing red indicator light announced mockingly that the outer door was open and Kara McIntire was dead.

"God *dammit*, Cal," Cowboy rasped, shaking his head, wiping blood from his cheek with the back of his hand. "Why couldn't you idiots make this easy on yourselves? I didn't want this...any of this."

"Don't be so fucking maudlin, Roger," Damiani muttered, limping away from the lock door. His ordered demeanor was as ruffled as his

tailored clothes, and there seemed to be an almost maniacal look to his eyes and his mussed hair. "I must be getting soft in my old age." He bent over with a grunt of effort and retrieved the small hand laser I'd taken from him. "Still, there will be plenty of time for recriminations later."

Hearing the approach of running footsteps behind us, I numbly glanced around to see a handful of Elite Bodyguards rushing into the room, carbines at the ready.

"Is everything all right, Sir?" the lead Guard asked him.

"All taken care of," the Council Exec waved them off. "Just a few small details to wrap up," he raised the laser to shoulder level, aiming it at Rachel's Head.

I was tensing to make a jump at him, knowing it would be the last thing I ever did, when the inner airlock door did the oddest thing...it blew out of the wall with a concussion of hot gas that threw me halfway across the room.

I hit on my back and, suddenly, there was a giant hand pressing down on my chest and everything was black.

Is this, I wondered, what it was like to be dead?

It took me over a second to realize that one of the heavy work tables that had been across from the door had landed on top of me. I threw it off without much effort and found myself surrounded by combat-suited Fleet Intell commandos, faces anonymous under featureless hoods, hands filled with the bulk of electron beamers. I found Rachel, still in a half-crouch amid drifting clouds of pale smoke, and saw that the confusion in her eyes matched my own, but at least



she was all right.

Most of the Executive Bodyguards that had come into the bay were already down, but one stumbled to his feet even as I watched, and the commando nearest to me opened up with his beamer. The pulse of charged particles erupted from the muzzle of his rifle like a bolt of lightning, and I could feel the hair on the back of my neck standing up from the static electricity as the shot took the Council Guard in the chest, blowing a hole the size of dinner plate through his Reflex Armor .

Then he swung that intimidating muzzle towards me.

"No!" I heard a frantic cry. "He's one of us!"

My head snapped around at the familiar voice, and I saw one of the hooded figures approaching, reaching up to pull off his concealing headgear. Emerging from under that faceless hood was the most beautiful shit-eating grin I'd ever seen in my life.

"Deke, you son of a bitch," I breathed softly in disbelief, smiling so broadly it hurt my face. "How in the hell..." I trailed off, shaking my head.

"The Bulldog always has a backup plan, Caleb boy." He winked, moving towards me as the commando squad moved to secure the area. Behind him, Kara stood with arms folded in satisfaction. I knew that whatever had gone on here, she had been in on it.

I was about to move toward them, but a little voice in my head told me to take a closer look around. When I did, I found a couple of things missing in the equipment bay...Cowboy and Damiani.

"Oh, shit," I muttered. "Deke, give me a gun, quick."

He frowned, tossing me his beamer. "What's up?"

"Cowboy and that Council Exec, Damiani took off, probably split up," I told him, checking the weapon's charge while I spoke. "I'm going after West. You and Kara take Damiani. If you've got other squads in here, tell 'em not to shoot me."

"Don't you want some backup?" Deke asked me. "I can send a couple of my guys with you..."

"I'll take it alone," I declared. I looked at Rachel, who walked over to put a hand on my shoulder. "This is personal."

"Not quite alone," she corrected me, gesturing at the wall where Trint had lain. A bloody stain marked where he had been, but the cyborg was gone.

## Chapter Eighteen

I switched to thermal imaging once I left the equipment bay and was immediately immersed in a forest of ghostly afterimages of the Elite Bodyguards, the Intell commandos, Trint and Cowboy. Cowboy wasn't too hard to follow---his rocket pistol had been fired only a couple minutes before, and its unique thermal signature told me which of the spectral shades was his.

I tried to keep to the shadows, trusting on the self-camouflaging abilities of my combat suit to conceal me from any of the Corporate guards that might still be roaming around. I could take them, but I couldn't afford the distraction...and I wasn't about to let Cowboy get away.

As much as I was aware that all this was directly the responsibility of Andre Damiani, all the rage that burned in the core of my soul was focused on Cowboy. He had betrayed us all---betrayed the very ones who'd trusted him with their lives. He'd put my wife and brother in danger and gotten Mat killed. He was at least indirectly responsible for the deaths of all those people in Mt. Carmel Medical Center. Now, I was going to kill him.

If it didn't end with that, I didn't care. This wasn't about that. This was between us.

I followed Cowboy's trail through the labyrinthine corridors of the dome, hearing the distant tremble of explosions and the sharp cracks of discharging energy weapons. Murdock, I thought to myself with

not a little bitterness, had done it again. I suppose he must have had a reason for not telling me about this backup plan and Deke's role in it, but I didn't have to like it.

Approaching footsteps forced me into a darkened corner, but it was only more frightened technicians fleeing the fighting, and they didn't even pause as they scrambled by, probably not even knowing where they were running to. I let them pass, then continued on my way.

Cowboy, I figured, had to be trying for a ship, probably hidden somewhere under the dome---not the same one as Damiani, though. I wouldn't expect either of them to trust the other that much. Still, it limited the possibilities. The ship would have to be somewhere near the surface of the dome to allow it to take off, and I figured that meant it would be under the landing pad---it was the most obvious choice.

And that was just where he was heading. I made my way through the skeletal depths of the dome's circumference, trying to watch all directions at once, including up---I remembered how Secarius had swung into those crossbeams. I wondered where *he'd* gotten off to...no, I took that back. I knew where he'd be. I felt sorry for Damiani if that scary bastard caught up with him.

As cautious as I was trying to be, I turned the next corner directly into the path of a rocket from West's pistol.

I would have probably died right there with my brains splattered over the floor, except for the fact that the electron beamer I'd appropriated was equipped with a neurolink, and the weapon's muzzle was pointed directly to my front. That was all that saved me: the

moment I detected the thermal bloom of the handgun I gave the beamer a mental command to fire.

The ion blast didn't actually hit the rocket---that would have been impossible in the microsecond I had to act---but the pulse of charged particles superheated the air between the rocket and myself, and the heat plume threw the missile off its course just enough to send it careening past my head by a couple centimeters.

I dove to the floor, spraying the end of the hall with electron fire, but Cowboy ducked back into the doorway from which he'd emerged and my shots did nothing but burn chunks out of the far wall. Jumping to my feet, I sprinted down the corridor after him, throwing myself shoulder-first past the doorway and hosing it with the beamer as I crashed into the far wall.

The crackling lines of blue-white fire tore into the maintenance room, blowing tools and scanners out of their wall racks and setting fire to plastic work tables, but Cowboy was nowhere to be seen. Pushing myself away from the wall, I regained my balance and carefully inched into the open doorway, scanning for any niche that could hide Cowboy from my view. The stink of smoldering plastic hung heavy in the canned air, and I began to blink at the clouds of stinging smoke before my augments took over, adding extra chemicals to my tear ducts to wash away the pollutants.

I tried to run a thermal scan, but the burning tables and the sparking of shorted wiring in the banks of computer diagnostic gear made it nearly impossible to pick up Cowboy's signature, so I concentrated instead on audio, listening for his heartbeat. The Reflex

A armor would normally mask it, but he hadn't been wearing his face hood, so I might just be able to pick up his carotid pulse...

Nothing. I took a hesitant step into the room, sweeping back and forth with the muzzle of the beamer, the air around it shimmering from the heat pouring off of its cooling vanes. Static electricity from the long bursts I'd fired crackled up and down the metal sections of the stock, making the hair stand up on the back of my neck and sending shivers up my spine. Sweat soaked the small of my back and my neck was starting to itch badly beneath the collar of my Reflex Armor...familiar sensations all.

Only difference was, last time I'd felt them, I'd been fighting side-by-side with Cowboy, hunting down Tahni troopers. Now, I was hunting one of my own, with a Tahni Imperial Guard cyborg as a possible ally. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?

I tried to listen again for Cowboy's pulse, but my heart was beating too loudly. I used my biofeedback loop to slow it down and control my breathing, straining my ears and my augment sensors. He had to be in here somewhere.

Wait. There, to my left, behind a bank of diagnostic computers...just a faint trace of a distant drumbeat, fading almost as I detected it. I swung the beamer around and cut loose at the console, the brilliant burst of ions slicing through the computer station, blowing its readout panel apart in a light show of sparks and glowing metal. I knew the beamer's charge was running below half, but I continued to pour it on, not caring for any of the alternative strategies.

Finally, the thermoplastic molding that held the diagnostic bank together absorbed more heat than it was designed to take and the whole station exploded into bits of melted polymer, splitting down the middle, what remained of it falling aside in two hulks of smoking junk. Staggering back from the intense heat washing back from both the burning console and the overheated beam emitter, I ceased fire and tried to get a look through the inky clouds of smoke at what I fully expected to be Roger West's corpse.

Instead, I found myself staring stupidly at a partially-open hatch to a crawlway, previously concealed behind the computer banks.

"Fuck me," I sighed, tension pounding in my temples.

What now? He could wait somewhere in there and pick me off as I came in...but I wasn't going to let him get away. I cursed myself for not bringing a handgun---the beamer was going to be awkward as hell to drag through that tunnel, built for squat worker 'bots, not humans.

Worker 'bots... I spun around, hunting through the wrecked machinery until I saw the object I'd barely noticed when I came into the room. Squat and rounded with a half-dozen articulated appendages, the pair of small maintenance robots sat in the corner on their tracked carriages, deactivated and motionless.

Running over to the machines, I ran a diagnostic check through my neurolink and found that one of them was operational and had a workable charge in its battery. I carried the machine over to the crawlway, used its two grasping arms to mount my beamer across its left side, then set it inside. A little finagling with its primary control system allowed me to see the thermal image view from its main

surveillance camera, and I could clearly see West's heat signature heading down the tunnel.

I felt like Captain Mitchell, Armored Command as I crawled in behind the machine, sending it out a couple meters in front of me. If Cowboy wanted to ambush me again, he'd have to go through my little buddy first...and, since I could control both the 'bot and the beamer through my neurolink, my little buddy had *teeth*.

Viewing the tunnel through the 'bot's eyes helped to alleviate some of the claustrophobia I felt in the narrow tunnel, which was barely tall enough for me to stay on my hands and knees. I consoled myself that it would be considerably rougher going for Cowboy, who was nearly two meters tall. But at least he knew where he was going.

His thermal trail led a twisting path through the tunnel system, taking several turns through the many four-way intersections that seemed to crop up every few dozen meters. I began to think that I'd mistakenly circled around and began following my own heat trail, and that I'd be in the tunnels forever, endlessly chasing my own tail, when the 'bot's viewer picked up the faint light of an exit ahead.

Retrieving the beamer, I let the 'bot continue forward, but began to put more room between it and myself as we approached the open exit hatch, emplaced at the juncture of the tunnel I was in and another running perpendicular. Switching back to normal optics in its viewer, I saw that the exit came out into some kind of storage room---heavy lockers were visible through the hatchway, and a hydraulic liftjack stuck out of one corner.

I tried listening again for a pulsebeat, but I was too far away from



the opening. For all I could tell, West could have hopped a ride to Eridani, or he could just as easily be standing beside the hatchway with a proton warhead in each hand.

*All right, Shorty, I thought at the 'bot, time to earn your pay.*

I inched the machine into the open hatchway, hoping that if there was an ambush laying for me, the 'bot would trigger it. I put an arm across my face, worried about possible shrapnel from a rocket hit on the machine, still keeping an eye on the worker 'bot. Once I saw the angle the rocket came in from, I would jump in and use the robot as a shield to get a shot at Cowboy.

I tensed to follow the 'bot through as it edged into the hatchway...and then the machine vanished within a brilliant flash of sun-bright light and a wash of superheated air bounced me off the tunnel wall.

The only thing that kept the plasma blast from flash-frying me in my own juices was the fact that the hatchway was at the juncture of two tunnels---much of the heat was channeled sideways into the other tunnel by the impact on the 'bot. My upraised arm kept my face from serious burns and the Reflex Armor protected the rest of me, but the roasting air filled my lungs, leaving me desperate for a breath, and my head was swimming with the impact against the wall.

I struggled to stay conscious, my implants dosing me with a shot of stimulants, and I vaguely realized that my hair was on fire. I patted it out with my free hand as I struggled to my knees, realizing I only had seconds before Cowboy would stick his head into the tunnel, see me and use the plasma gun he'd acquired to turn me into a black smear

on the wall.

There was a flash of movement in the tunnel mouth, and I desperately raised the beamer with one hand and fired half-blind at the blur, partially concealed by the burning debris of the worker 'bot. The lightning flash of the electron beam only further taxed my overworked corneal implant filters, but I thought I hit something, and the dark shape recoiled away from the hatchway.

Clenching my teeth and shaking my head, I finally got my feet beneath me and threw myself headfirst through the hatchway, barely feeling the heat from the flames I passed through. I hosed the room with the beamer as I hit the floor on my shoulder and rolled to my feet, vision clearing. The iridescent flashes of ion fire tore into the walls and scored deep burns into the lockers, but Cowboy was gone. I crouched in the middle of the room, panting for breath, and checked the charge of the beamer. It was about three shots from exhaustion...and I was pretty close to exhaustion myself.

Noticing one of the heavily-armored lockers partially ajar, I staggered across the room and nudged it the rest of the way open. Inside was a partially-stocked rack of the kind of pump-action plasma guns that I'd used extensively during the war, and, below them, stacks of spare magazines. I'd chased Cowboy into an armory. Fucking brilliant of me, huh?

I dropped the nearly-spent beamer, its thermoplastic and alloy frame clattering loudly on the metal-grill floor, and pulled a plasma gun out of the rack, hefting its familiar weight. I slapped a full mag home and pumped a round into the chamber, then grabbed a spare

and stuck it into my equipment belt at the small of my back. I wanted to linger and search for a pistol and maybe some grenades, but I couldn't let Cowboy get too good a lead on me.

Holding my new weapon at high port, I followed Cowboy's heat trail out the armory's door and down the narrow corridor. From the inadequate lighting and the unfurnished air of the area I was running through, I surmised I was at the edge of the dome, possibly underneath the occupied levels but still above the lake. Perhaps this was a secret section open only to Cowboy and the Elite Bodyguard, judging by the heavy artillery in that arms room.

All of which meant that we were probably pretty close to wherever he had that ship. I at least *hoped* he was running for a ship. If he was going through all this just to try to take a shot at me, things were going to get pretty nasty.

There were no twists and turns in this trail---the tunnel led straight from the armory along the curve of the dome's outer wall, and Cowboy's thermal signature followed it exactly, glowing brightly now with the heat of the discharged plasma gun. He was going along at a pretty good clip, too, leading me to believe he'd given up on ambushing me for a fast run to his escape route. Either he was getting desperate, or maybe I had nailed him with the shot from the tunnel and he was hurting...or both.

I put on some speed myself, not yet feeling the effects of the blast in the tunnel, but knowing I would later. I ignored the little twinges of pain from my face and back, concentrating on the clanging of my spiked boot soles off the grillwork floor, letting the drumbeat

hypnotize me. In the rhythm of my steps I could almost hear my father, reading from the Book of Life. Vengeance is mine, I shall repay, sayeth the Lord...An eye for an eye and a tooth...Thou shalt not kill...A time to kill, and a time to heal.

God, how I laid awake at night, running those words through my head, trying to make them run together into something that would help me solve the moral dilemma of going to war. All it ever gave me was a headache and a firm conviction that I'd have to trust my instincts---just like now.

The corridor widened gradually as it went along, until the end came into sight and I pulled up to an abrupt halt. Less than a hundred meters from where I stood, a wedge-shaped star courier sat nestled in a boxy grillwork structure that I knew to be a gantry elevator up to the landing pad. Its belly ramp was down, and at its foot was Roger West.

We saw each other at the same time, but my weapon was in firing position while his was held muzzle-up as he attempted to board. I jerked the trigger and the big gun bucked in my hands, the glaring fireball it belched out sending a searing backblast of heat over my exposed face. I willed the shot toward him, envisioning the ionized hydrogen vaporizing that Goddamned ridiculous handlebar mustache and his face along with it, but Cowboy had a split-second to act, and, for one of the 'Boys, that was time enough. He threw himself headfirst away from the ship's ramp just as I fired, allowing the plasmoid to travel through the space he had occupied and slam into the courier's left rear landing strut.

Metal and plastic melted off of the thin support arms in bubbling sheets, sending clouds of black smoke streaming off of it, but for a moment I could actually see it warping under the starship's weight before it finally collapsed. The left side of the courier's delta wing slammed into the gridwork floor with a scream of shearing superstructure and a shower of ceramic and polymer shrapnel, my view of Cowboy now blocked by both the bulk of the ship and the billowing clouds of steam.

I knew I would be a wonderful target if Cowboy was in a position to take a shot at me from behind the ship, but I stood my ground, slowly advancing toward the ship, one deliberate step at a time.

"I don't want to kill you, Cal," I heard his voice call from somewhere far away---years farther away than the few dozen meters that separated us. "Just let me go...it doesn't have to be like this."

*You made it like this, Cowboy,* I thought at him, not caring if he could hear it. *You made your choice a long time ago.*

If he picked up my transmission, the only indication of it was the squeal of underused servos as the gantry elevator slowly began rising from its berth towards the surface. He was running...but not fast enough. I sprinted a zigzag course toward the platform, ducking and weaving, shifting my plasma gun to my left hand and using my right to pull the face hood from one of the cargo pouches on my utility belt---I'd need it on the surface.

I only had it halfway on when a starbright flare of hydrogen speared out from the haze behind the courier and passed only centimeters from my left leg, the heat searing my side even through

the Reflex Armor. The plasmoid punched into the floor less than a meter behind me and the steam explosion from the vaporized metal sent shrapnel slamming into my back. I rolled forward on my shoulder, biting back a curse at the burning stings up and down my right side---at least the armor had kept the makeshift hypersonic bullets from penetrating.

Catching a glimpse of motion behind the wafting steam rolling off the underside of the courier, I sprang to my feet and took a snap-shot one-handed with the heavy assault gun. The recoil nearly tore the weapon from my grasp, but I saw the plasma flash impact the belly of the ship, some of it seeming to splash over the shadowy figure.

Pulling my face hood over my head, I had just enough time to transfer my grasp to the gun's pump and cycle its action one-handed before I reached the gantry elevator. It was already about a meter and a half above the floor, but I took the gap in one stride, the grillwork rattling beneath me as I landed near the nose gear of the courier.

Even as I landed, Cowboy was on me, hands empty and claws extended. His assault gun lay on the platform behind him, its receiver melted from the splash of plasma I had seen. His utility belt---with holstered rocket pistol---had been burned away, along with a not-insignificant chunk of his right hip, by the blast from my electron beamer back in the armory. More significantly, he hadn't had the chance to put on his protective hood before losing the belt.

I didn't bother trying to bring around the assault gun for a shot---there wasn't time or room for that---I just thrust it receiver-forward into his face. He stumbled back, blood spraying from his nose and

lips, and I took the opportunity to let the plasma gun fall and extend my own talons before he could spring back at me.

I could almost feel the fear radiating off of him as he realized the position he was in. There would be no more sniping from ambush now; we were in my arena. West was the pilot, the sniper, the Cowboy who counted on his fast gun and wired aim. I had always been the sledgehammer of our little outfit, with all the finesse of a punch in the mouth, and we were playing my game.

There was no room for a ballet of martial arts as the elevator platform rose through the ceiling with the hiss of an airtight seal, and no time for it, either. Cowboy knew he had to make it through me into the ship to survive, and, without a sealed Reflex suit and face mask, he could only last a minute or two in the chlorine atmosphere.

It wasn't the lack of air, or even the cold that was the problem---if there'd been a vacuum out there, we both could have endured it for close to fifteen minutes. But the one part of our body that the Commonwealth surgeons hadn't been able to harden or protect with their little scientific gadgets had been our mucous membranes, and a chlorine atmosphere would eat through them in a few seconds. One of us *might* survive that for a while without protection, but it wouldn't be pleasant.

Our talons clashed with a skitter of polymer and our elbows, knees and forearms smacked together with a lightning-quick series of strikes and blocks---all there was room for in the small section of floor. I concentrated on his right leg, knowing that the nasty wound from the beamer would eventually slow him down there, and drove him back

against the nose gear of the courier.

We were both moving faster than I'd ever experienced before, even against the Tahni 'borgs, and I was beginning to wonder if we weren't too evenly matched for either of us to land a clean blow. Then his right guard slipped just a fraction, and I managed to slam his injured hip with my knee. He grimaced, slipped and hit the ground rolling away from the nose of the courier. I chased him, trying for a stamp that could put the leg out of commission, but he was slicker than I thought---he caught me with one leg off the ground and nailed my plant foot with a heel. I fell forward, trying to twist away from him, but he caught my falling torso with his other foot and tossed me over his head.

I found myself suddenly flying through the air, knowing, to my chagrin, that this flight would end all too abruptly. Something---I thought it was the edge of the courier's tilted delta wing---hit me across the lower back, and I felt all the wind leave my body in a rush as an explosion of pain swept from my lumbar all the way up and down my body. I was bent backwards, then bounced off the ship like a handball, and I barely retained the composure to take the landing on my shoulder and roll to my feet.

I remember what happened next only because my headcomp recorded it; my conscious mind was in total shutdown from the pain and shock, and I was acting solely on instincts and programming. Somehow, I had managed to come down right in front of my plasma gun, and something, whether my gut or my headcomp, told my senseless body to reach down and scoop it up, then look for Cowboy.



But when I looked up...he was nowhere to be found. I automatically swept the area with my augment sensors to be sure he wasn't trying to sneak up on me, but there was nothing there---except this incredible sense of cold. Then two things finally penetrated my dazed mind: one, that Cowboy must have used the seconds I had been out of it to run on board the ship; and, two, that I was now standing on the surface of the landing pad and it was bleak, airless, and incredibly, bone-chillingly cold.

Thank God my headcomp had prevented me from breathing and caused the byomer in my face hood to form a gas seal, or I probably would have sucked in a lungful of chlorine already, and been well on my way to bleeding to death from the lesions in my lung tissue. The cutter we had arrived on had been joined by a pair of Stealthships, nearly identical to the one I'd flown in the war, though there were no troops in sight. But as intimidating as the barren landscape around me was, with its frost-capped mountains and deadly acid lake, the supernova that was exploding in my consciousness was that Roger West was on board that ship, and would probably be lifting off in seconds unless I stopped him.

That was when I noticed that the boarding ramp was closing...I ran for it, but it was already only centimeters from sealing, and I knew that even I couldn't force it open by hand. But I still had that plasma gun. The angle was wrong on the left side of the courier because of the damage I'd done to the landing gear under the port wing, so I ducked under the listing delta and took up a position about ten meters from the ship. I braced the weapon against my thigh, not wanting to

subject my bruised lower back to the torture of a shoulder shot, and whispered to the gun's computer to do its thing.

The intense heat that washed back from the plasma pulse was a welcome, if momentary respite from the biting wind that lashed at me from off of the lake, and it warmed things up even more on the belly of the courier. Ceramic and alloy armor melted away with an audible crack of supersonic black steam, and there was suddenly a jagged hole the size of a dinner plate at the forward juncture of the ramp and the ship's hull.

Not enough. I racked the slide back, sending the spent casing hissing out of the chamber in a mist of liquid nitrogen, then braced it again and fired. This time, the plasmoid blew a more-satisfying meter-wide gap in the belly of the courier and went through to scorch the inner hull above the ramp. A backwash of ship's atmosphere, steam and flame-retardant foam from the courier's fire-fighting system puffed out of the opening, obscuring it for a heartbeat as I ran toward it. I couldn't see through it on thermal because of the foam, and auditory amplification was near useless in the thinner atmosphere, but I didn't have the time for caution---I only had a few more minutes before the oxygen supply from my support organs ran out, and less than that before the intense cold would freeze my arteries.

So I jumped straight into that cloud of mist, and straight into the crimson flash of laserfire. The same cloud of smoke and gas that allowed me to jump into that trap, however, was the one thing that saved me from an instant death...Cowboy couldn't see me any more than I could see him, so he was forced to fire at the movement, and

the burst, rather than blowing a hole through my forehead, caught me on the heavier armor over my right chest.

A fierce, burning agony sliced through my pectoral muscle and I threw myself flat, triggering off another blast from the plasma gun, the novaflash blinding me in the close quarters of the courier's hold. This time, because of the pain in my chest and my weakened condition, the kick from the weapon tore it out of my grasp and sent it rolling back out of the gap in the hull, and I found myself sliding back toward the hole myself, because of the tilt of the ship.

I extended my left-hand talons and dug them into the thermoplastic deck to halt my slide, and, as I came to a halt, I found that both the mist and my vision had cleared. Across the equipment bay, propped up on his left knee in the cockeyed entrance to the passageway up to the cockpit, was Roger West, and he looked almost as bad as I felt.

I hadn't scored a direct hit with the plasma shot---that would have been too much to ask---but the right side of his head was a charred, bloody mess from the near-miss, and there was a wicked-looking burn-through on his right shoulder. He was breathing in deep gasps, and I could already see blisters on his face from where the chlorine had brushed him. The pulse carbine he'd shot me with lay resting against the bulkhead, but he wasn't making any attempt to retrieve it as yet.

"Guess..." he rasped, "we're gonna' wind up with one of us dead, huh?"

"Looks like it," I replied evenly, the muscles in my shoulder bunching up as I used my talons to pull myself up to a crouch.

"Didn't want it to happen this way..." He shook his head. "Andre wanted y'all dead, but I thought I could bring ya' around..."

"A lot of the people that died at that hospital were my friends," I told him, finding myself unusually calm---or maybe I was just drained. "All of them trusted me to protect them. Someone's got to pay for that, Cowboy."

"I understand." And I really thought he did---he didn't seem so desperate anymore; just thoughtful and resigned.

"Tell me something," I asked him, curiosity getting the better of me. "How much of what you told us about the Predecessors was true?"

He grinned, a horrible sight with the damage to his face, and laughed hoarsely until coughing stopped it.

"All of it, Cal ol' buddy. All of it and more."

Then, without a second's warning, a rumbling came up through the courier, shaking me down to the bone, and the deck began to shift beneath me. It took me less than a heartbeat to realize what had happened.

"Bastard!" I hissed, struggling to hold my balance.

While we'd been talking, he had linked with the ship's computer and warmed the engines up, and now he was taking off with me on board. I saw him reaching for the pulse carbine, trying to catch me off balance, and I launched myself across the hold at him, my pain and exhaustion swallowed up in rage. We locked talons and were immediately bounced off of a bulkhead as the ship lurched back to level.

We rolled across the deck, pounding viciously at each other with our knees and elbows, and simultaneously struggling on a cybernetic battlefield for control of the ship's computer. There, he had the advantage of already seizing the high ground---he'd penetrated the system and gained control, and I was going to have to find a back door in.

The beating we were administering to each other seemed to fade into the background as our headcomps and penetration programs dueled through their chess game of moves and counters.

*I felt the solid jolt run up my leg as my knee smashed into his left hip...*

I tried to cut power, but that was too obvious and he had the route blocked, so I tried to penetrate navigation and set an automatic landing. No go...he'd anticipated me there as well.

*His forehead came up to catch me a glancing blow across the bridge of my nose, and my vision was lost in a sea of stars. Suddenly he was on top...*

Fire control...that was it. I told the ship's failsafe system that there was an engine routing leak and plasma was eating through the control lines, and simultaneously convinced it that the ship was in a stable orbit. Instant engine cutoff. But I had lied...we weren't in orbit, and we weren't safe. We were nearly thirty meters over the landing pad, too damn close to the edge, and dropping like a stone...

*I managed to free my left-hand talons and jab them to the hilt into his right side. He screamed, and I used the sudden shift of leverage to wedge my knee into his groin and flip him over my head. I tried to get to my feet, but then the hard surface of the pad rushed up to smack into us and*

*everything was black...*

## Interlude: Trint

Trint heard the approaching footsteps and took refuge in a recessed corner to let the squad of Fleet Intell commandos pass. He bore them no ill will...in fact, he was impressed with the foresight that whoever was in charge of the raid had shown by holding something in reserve. But he wasn't willing to expose himself to Terrans who had probably served in the war and would assume him an enemy.

That event could keep him from accomplishing his remaining goal in life during the time he had remaining. It wasn't the wound in his chest that worried him; the warhead had done only minor damage to his organs despite the ugly hole it had produced. No, his only concern was the explosive in his cerebellum. Damiani had slipped away, and unless he could kill the man within the next twenty-six minutes and stop the transmission from his headcomp, that device would put an end to his short and unusual life.

Once the coast was clear, Trint moved back into the corridor and took off at a quick jog of only about fifty kilometers an hour. The hallways of the installation were cast into an eerie relief by the emergency chemical "ghostlights" that had come on with the failure of main power---Trint had heard the distant explosions that he assumed had been the commandos taking out the generators. The lack of light didn't overly concern him; he raced through the labyrinth like a homing missile.

He knew where the man would go, much as the Corporate Executive Director had tried to conceal his escape preparations. He

had a cutter in a cold orbit, with all power shut down, and a small orbital flyer concealed at the perimeter of the dome, built into the outer skin. Trint had to reach it before he did...he knew that Damiani could activate the explosive just as easily from orbit, and wouldn't hesitate to do it. He didn't believe that the signal would be effective over interstellar distances, as Damiani had hinted before, but he couldn't take that chance---it would violate his basic programming.

Much as he wanted to help Rachel Mitchell and her husband, he could not ignore the threat of his own destruction. He managed to make his way to the other side of the dome without confronting any of the Commonwealth troops, though he very nearly ran smack into the middle of a raging firefight between the commandos and Damiani's Executive Bodyguards at one point. The Corporate guards seemed to be getting the worst of it, which he found particularly gratifying. He understood having that kind of implantation and augmentation if it was forced on you by the necessity of a war, but he found it intensely disgusting that one would do it so as to become a sell-sword mercenary. He realized, however, that his particular situation might color his opinions on the subject.

He managed to sneak by the battle, ducking through a utility storage area, and soon reached the perimeter of the dome. Coming up around the curve of the structure, he was brought up short by the sound of strident human voices. He edged around the corner until he could see three of the Executive Guards gathered around Andre Damiani, arrayed around a maintenance hatch that Trint knew to lead to the man's escape shuttle.



"You're not leaving us here," one of the Guards was saying, gesturing meaningfully with his pulse carbine. "Our contract didn't include dying for you...or spending the next millennium in a penal colony."

"Don't be a moron!" Damiani snapped, seemingly unintimidated by the show of force. "So long as I'm free, I can undo anything they've done! Simply surrender...within two months, you'll be back at your jobs and these peons will be the ones breaking rocks for a living."

The lead Guardsman seemed to be wavering, but Trint couldn't wait for them to make up their minds...if he did, Damiani would be gone. He wished, for a moment, that he'd been equipped with the implant weapons that were so prevalent among the humans, but his Tahni designers had preferred the flexibility to mount different armaments externally without the need for separate internal energy feeds.

Still, as the Sacred Book said, a wise warrior wishes only for a brave death. He'd have to use the weapons available to him, and he'd have to take out the guards first, or risk being shot in the back. He burst from his hiding place at a full sprint, barely visible to a natural eye, and slammed into the nearest of the Corporate elite. The human was wearing Reflex Armor and sporting a hardened skeleton and bionic joints, but he was caught flat-footed by the savage attack and took the cyborg's flying kick flush in the chest. The Guard was smashed into the wall, and his pulse carbine popped free of his hands and into Trint's.

When the Tahni touched down, he swung around with the carbine

and sent a burst directly through the faceplate of the Guard who had been arguing with Damiani. The last of the elite troopers had a moment to react, and she used it to squeeze the trigger of her pulse carbine, emptying the weapon's magazine in a sweeping arc that pocked the wall behind them and shattered the muzzle of Trint's appropriated weapon before catching him across the left leg. The laser blasts burned away cloned flesh from the Tahni's thigh, but they weren't sufficient to penetrate his duralloy endoskeleton, and they missed the thermoplastic muscles that flanked the artificial femur.

Realizing that his own laser had been ruined by the wild burst, Trint used the carbine like a club, first smacking the woman's own weapon out of her hands, then reversing it and smashing the buttstock through her faceplate. Blood and transplas fragments flew as the helmet was knocked off and she staggered back into the wall...and that was when Trint noticed that the maintenance hatch was yawning open, and Damiani had escaped through it.

Roaring a Tahni curse, the cyborg grabbed the dazed Executive Guard by the shoulder and thigh, lifted her high above him and threw her head-first into the opposite wall. She impacted with a wet crunch, her skull splitting open satisfyingly, but the cyborg didn't wait around to watch the results of his gory *coup-de-grace*; instead, he ducked through the open hatch, intent on his pursuit of the man whose death could keep him alive.

The maintenance tunnel was narrow and low, forcing Trint to run hunched over through its dark passages, but it was mercifully short. Less than a hundred meters from its entrance was the compact, lifting-

body shape of the shuttle, set sideways in the wall of the dome on a swing-out platform---and he didn't need the rush of outgoing air whistling by him at increasing pitch to tell him that it was already halfway open.

Trint could feel the bitterly cold, caustic atmosphere leaking through as the air in the tunnel rushed out with the force of a hurricane, sending a hail of loose bits of trash and metal fragments lashing at him, but it was nothing against the futile rage that burned inside him. He didn't know whether to call it a survival instinct programmed into him by his creators or just raw, unplanned-for emotion, but he could feel it pulsing inside him and he had to act.

The platform wasn't yet all the way down, but Damiani had already lit the shuttle's take-off jets, trying to get out of the dome before his former slave could reach him. The heat from the flaring hydrogen rockets washed over the Tahni, but he ignored it as he did the cold, sprinting across the meters between him and the shuttle and throwing himself onto the edge of its wing just as it began to lift from the platform.

He sank his duralloy-boned fingers into the heat-resistant thermoplastic shielding that covered the wing, trying to hold on as the little ship jolted free of the dome, rising jerkily on twin columns of fire as Damiani attempted to shake off his tormenter. Trint's legs swung crazily across the surface of the wing, but he managed to keep his tentative hold, despite the gyrating of the shuttle. The little aerospacecraft swung out over the landing pad, climbing to nearly twenty meters above it---before ice began to form on the wings.

It was ice, not the solid hydrochloric acid that sometimes precipitated on the uninviting base---the moisture in the dome's atmosphere had condensed and then frozen, and the ice was filling in the indentations Trint's fingertips had dug into the wing's surface. His hold on the flyer gave way with sickening slowness, and he found himself sliding backward off the wing and dropping nearly twenty meters to the graphite below.

The cyborg landed hard on his back, feeling some of his support organs burst from the impact. It didn't matter, he thought, lying face-up on the pad. He didn't need the biological material to survive short-term---and his hope for long-term survival was rising quickly through the atmosphere, trailing tongues of white fire.

The Commonwealth ships might capture him before Damiani could make it to his cutter, but it would be too late. Trint was, effectively, dead. It was an oddly peaceful feeling. There were no programming directives to cover the situation, and he somehow felt that he had overcome his programming and become his own master. It had come a bit late, of course.

He rose from his prone position at the flash of light and subdued roar from behind him on the landing pad, and saw the star courier rising from the pad. He instantly knew it must be Roger West's escape ship, and thought it was amusing that the two men most responsible for all this would get away with their lives. A human, he reflected, would think it a gross miscarriage of justice; while a Tahni priest would shrug it off as the will of the Emperor---not the decadent fleshly shell that had run from the advancing Terran troops at the end of the

war, but the immortal spirit ruler that supposedly inhabited him.

Trint had just decided that he preferred the human view when the wedge-shaped star courier's belly jets cut off, it listed to the side and plunged back to the pad, crashing only a few meters from the edge, less than thirty meters from where Trint rested. He was surprised the fusion reactor didn't rupture or the hydrogen tanks blow, but the craft merely split amidships, sending up a cloud of vapor, steam and bits of plastic and metal.

The Tahni watched with open curiosity, wondering what human god had brought about this fortuitous turn of events. He rose to his feet, intent on getting a better look at the crash, and then someone staggered out of the gap in the hull, falling to one knee beside it. The human was wearing a suit of byomer Reflex Armor, complete with a face-covering EVA helmet of the kind you might find in the locker of a star courier, but Trint knew the heartbeat and the body shape...it was Roger West.

Maybe, he reconsidered, there *was* justice after all.

## Interlude: Cowboy

The only thing Roger West could think of once he recovered from the initial shock of the fall was air. His bronchial passages and lung tissue was already beginning to blister from the chlorine in the atmosphere, and his reserves of oxygen were perilously close to exhausted. He ignored the possible danger from Mitchell and concentrated on finding the EVA locker. It had broken loose from its moorings during the crash and was lying on its side in the middle of the equipment bay. Wrenching it open, he found what he needed---an emergency survival mask with an integral air supply---and pulled it over his head, sealing it to the universal yoke on the collar of his Reflex Armor.

He allowed himself a moment to savor the warm flow of oxygen rushing into the mouthpiece mounted on the front of the skintight mask, then he steadied himself and took stock of the situation. The courier, he quickly saw, was a lost cause. It had split in half amidships from the impact---actually, splintered would have been a better description, as the hull was mostly a light, graphite mix with the consistency of hard thermoplastic.

Cal Mitchell, at least, was no further danger. He had been too close to the gap he had blown in the boarding ramp when the ship hit, and the lower half of his left leg was trapped beneath the belly of the courier. West wasn't sure if he was conscious, but he suspected he was by now. West stared at him for a moment, wondering if he should kill him. True, Mitchell couldn't impede his escape any

further, but as long as the man was alive, Cowboy knew that he would come after him. He had, he recognized, made a serious error in judgement by involving Cal's family in this mess. People had emotional borders, after which there was no return.

"Shit," he muttered. Maybe the cold and lack of oxygen would get Cal.

Turning away from him, West climbed painfully out of the ruined craft, aware with every move of the damage his body had taken. He had to get some attention soon, or he would lose mobility and, with it, his ability to escape. He looked around at the other ships on the pad, amazed that no one was patrolling the area. Their numbers must be limited, he decided---or perhaps their only mission was to take what was in the facility as proof of Damiani's plans, and they didn't care if anyone got out.

At any rate, it worked to his favor. He could take the cutter they had come in on---it would have adequate medical facilities, and less in the way of security systems than the Stealthships. He was about to set out for the bigger spacecraft when his sensors warned him of motion behind him, and he wheeled around...and froze.

Advancing towards him was the menacing, broad-shouldered stuff of nightmares. *There* was yet another error in judgement, embodied in the grim-visaged Tahni Imperial Guard cyborg, covered with frozen blood, the dull grey of duralloy bone visible through the wounds in his thigh and chest. West realized, quite suddenly, that he needed a gun *fast*.

His various injuries forgotten, the ex-commando jumped back into

the body of the courier and went directly for the weapons locker. He'd used the now-destroyed pulse carbine against Mitchell because he'd been in a rush and it had been the first thing that came to hand, but he knew he'd need something more substantial to take out Trint. Luckily, he'd made provision to have something available.

The weapons' locker was still in place, but its door was jammed, and he had to use his talons to pry the door open. It only took him a second to accomplish, but he knew that the cyborg would be on him quickly, and he ran a nervous scan over his shoulder as he pulled out the hefty length of a plasma assault gun. He'd been impressed with the effectiveness of the somewhat-unwieldy weapon during the war, and had made sure to have plenty of them around wherever he found himself. He knew that the gun could take out the Tahni cyborg in one shot, a boast not too many other weapons could make.

Jacking a round home, Roger West rose from the locker and hopped back out of the split in the courier, ready to blast away at his pursuer...but Trint was nowhere in sight. It only took West a heartbeat to realize that the only place the cyborg could have gone was around the other side of the courier, but that was one heartbeat too long. Even as he was spinning around to heed the warning of his auxiliary sensors, one hundred and sixty kilos of flesh, steel and plastic pounded into his left side, jarring the plasma gun loose and bearing him down to the ground.

Despite the desperation of his struggle with the obviously pissed-off Tahni, the first thought that went through West's mind was that the surface of the pad was really fucking *cold*. With all of his other



problems, he hadn't noticed the cold until now. He just *had* to get out of there...this had dragged on way too long, and with every passing second, his prospects for survival dimmed.

The only problem was, Trint was in no mood to be cooperative, and he was one mean, dangerous son of a bitch...no, strike that, Cowboy thought crazily. The cyborg was no one's son. He'd been created in a lab, and whatever progress he'd made since then, he was still a construct. He couldn't push himself beyond programmed envelopes, and he couldn't improvise like a *real* sentient...could he?

Time to find out. Cowboy couldn't beat him with pure brute strength, he realized as they grappled on the ground...but maybe he could channel one last burst of energy into a focused attack. He instructed his headcomp to inject him with a massive dose of adrenaline and endorphines, knowing he was taking a huge risk---a hit that big could blow up his heart, or cause a massive brain hemorrhage.

Then it came, and West felt as if his body was floating on a sea of fire, his heart threatening to pound out of his chest. He used the burst to work a leg under Trint's chest and throw him back toward the edge of the pad. The Tahni landed on his back, less than a meter from the edge of the platform, less than a meter from a fifty-meter drop into an ocean of hydrochloric acid, and struggled to his feet.

Cowboy threw himself at the fallen plasma gun, its muzzle already pointed toward Trint, and fired it one-handed from the ground, not bothering to aim. The searing, white-hot ball of ionized hydrogen took the cyborg in the right shoulder, incinerating the upper half of

his right arm and sending the rest of the limb skittering across the graphite pad. Thrown off balance by the impact and explosion of plasma, Trint toppled backwards, flipping head-over-heels off the landing platform, barely managing to grasp the edge of the pad as fell.

West stared for a moment in disbelief at the fingers gripping the rim of the platform that were all he could still see of Trint. *God damn it!* What did it take to finish that thing? Levering himself off the ground, Cowboy began limping over to the edge of the pad, plasma gun held loosely by the pistol grip. He just had to make sure that thing was dead.

Reaching the rim, he stared down into the face of the...*being* that he had brought to Damiani more than ten years before. There was an almost-human hatred in those eyes, and a most inhuman determination as well. Back when he had taken the thing away from Tahn-Skyiiah, he had thought, naively, that he was doing it a favor, giving it a chance at continued existence. He'd entertained notions of himself as Androcles to the cyborg's lion, but that had been a nearly-fatal misreading of the situation. Roger West had no doubt that, if he just walked away from the Tahni, that the cyborg would find a way to pull himself up and come after him again. The thing had to be killed.

And since the Tahni war machine had beat the living shit out of him back inside the dome, West wasn't particularly inclined to give it a quick death. Grinning with satisfaction, he tracked the muzzle of the plasma gun away from the cyborg's face and toward its remaining hand, all that separated it from a nice, slow acid bath...

## Chapter Nineteen

I regained consciousness almost immediately after the crash, and almost immediately regretted it. My whole body was one, huge, throbbing ache; my head felt as if it were filled with buildfoam; and it looked very much like half of the fucking ship was sitting on top of my left leg. I couldn't feel any pain in the limb---or at least no more than the rest of my body felt, but that could have been a function of the nerves being severed or possibly the cold finally setting in. Even if my leg wasn't badly hurt, and even if my reserve air supply wasn't perilously close to exhaustion, the fact remained that I couldn't move...and Roger West could.

Seeing him rummaging frantically through one of the equipment lockers, I remained motionless, hoping he would still believe me helpless. He pulled on an emergency EVA mask, and seemed to relax somewhat, and I thought for a moment that he would take the time to finish me off, but, instead, he exited the courier through the gaping split in its hull.

Fighting the urge to breath a sigh of relief, I pulled myself up on one elbow to more carefully assess my situation...and felt my leg move slightly under the deckplates. My eyes widened in surprise. There had to be about a hundred metric tons of BiPhase Carbide and duralloy resting squarely on my calf; my leg, bone reinforcement and Reflex Armor notwithstanding, should have been the approximate consistency of gelatin. Encouraged, I attempted to pull my leg free,

but felt my foot snag on something.

I was about to try to stick my head down and find out what was happening, but was interrupted by the sudden return of Cowboy. I froze, afraid he had seen me moving; but, again, he seemed to pay me no heed. Instead, he was intent on prying open another of the ship's lockers, going so far as to use his talons to rip the door off. Out of the container he pulled a plasma gun---I had seen more of the damn things in the last half hour than I had in the last ten years---and immediately jumped back out of the gap in the hull. Something obviously had him spooked, and I was all for that.

Hesitating for a moment to be sure he wouldn't return yet again, I twisted around awkwardly to try to get a look at my leg---and had to shake my head at the fickle whims of fate. Cowboy, apparently, hadn't been able to fully retract the belly gear because of the damage I had done with the plasma blast. The twisted, burned wreckage of the left-side strut was caught in the belly door, leaving open about a half a meter, and wedging the ship off the ground enough to save my leg from being crushed to paste.

My foot, however, was trapped by a jagged section of BiPhase carbide that had splintered off the hull across my ankle. Bracing my right foot on the broken edge of the hull, I pushed with firm and consistent pressure, but let off as I felt the tendons in my ankle begin to stretch.

*Damn* it. Cowboy was out there, probably going for another ship, and I was laying here, worrying about a few tendons? The hell with that. Directing my pharmacy organ to dose my leg with a local

anesthetic, I jerked it out from beneath the hull, feeling the dull tug of the tendons and ligaments in my ankle snapping as my foot came free.

I could still walk---my implant muscles were attached to the bones by strands of byomer---and I quickly scrambled to my feet. I took a moment to check the weapons' locker, hoping Cowboy had left me something to work with, but it was bare. I guess he figured the pulse carbine and the plasma gun were all he'd conceivably need, but that left me with nothing but my talons and my balls if I went out there.

Hell, I thought with more bravado than I actually felt, that was four talons and one testicle more than I needed to take down that backstabbing bastard. I sprang out of the courier headfirst, flying a good ten meters over the pad before hitting on my shoulder and rolling into a crouch with my talons extended. I was ready for an attack, but the attack I witnessed wasn't directed at me.

I winced as I saw the bright flare of a plasmoid take the Tahni cyborg's arm off at the shoulder and send him reeling back over the side. I shook my head slightly, wondering why this Trint had turned on his masters. The few of the machines I'd encountered had seemed fanatically devoted. Could something like that actually have feelings and a personality? I mean, it was just a machine, right?

The point seemed moot, until Cowboy rose to his feet, and I noticed the clenching hand of the Tahni desperately holding on to the rim of the platform. Good Lord, those things were tough! I couldn't help but admire its determination, and I also couldn't help but wonder...did a construct like that have a will to live?

Cowboy limped slowly over to the edge, and I realized that he

meant to finish the cyborg off. I wondered if I should let him. True, the thing had helped us; but every memory I had of the Imperial Guard 'borgs was of coldly efficient killing machines, usually trying to work their craft on me or my comrades.

But if I let Cowboy kill him...how was I any better than those I was fighting? It's easy to be morally neutral when the hardest decisions you have to make are whether or not to bootleg some pirated ViR-ware, but when you've killed as many people as I have, you have to believe you were justified or you'll become a sociopath.

So I guess there was no other choice for me than the one I made.

*Playtime's over, motherfucker*, I broadcast at Cowboy on my neurolink, trying to distract him as I took off towards the edge at a dead sprint. His head snapped around as he saw me approach, and I saw his right arm begin to bring up the plasma gun. There was about thirty meters separating us, and I had to cross it before he could jack a new round home and put a hole in my torso the size of a planetoid.

Twenty meters. Every step seemed to take hours, and I could see in great detail each minute motion as Cowboy worked the action of the assault gun and brought its muzzle on line with my charge. The spent shell was ejected from the chamber in a lazy arc, still shimmering with ambient heat.

Ten meters. The slide racked home, and I could see the dull finish of the fresh round slamming into battery before it closed.

Five meters. The barrel of the gun, angled downward as Cowboy worked the action, began to climb upward with an agonizing slowness that still seemed too quick for me. I left the ground in a flying kick,

guessing he would fire at my legs rather than attempting to raise the muzzle for a center-mass shot. I sensed rather than saw the flash-roast heat of the weapon discharging, the blast passing only centimeters below my outstretched legs in the heartbeat before my right heel connected with his chest.

Cowboy's back arched and the plasma gun dropped from his hands as he shot off the side of the pad like he'd been launched by a mass driver---and I was about to join him, unable to halt my momentum toward the edge. I threw my hands out as I fell, desperate to grasp onto anything to break my fall, and somehow grasped the equipment belt strapped around Trint's waist. I was jerked to an abrupt halt, and found myself dangling in front of his legs, above fifty meters of featureless metal and endless kilometers of acid lake.

Twisting my head around, I saw Cowboy's wildly flailing form finally impact the surface of the lake with a splash of caustic fluid, and grimaced in appreciation. If the Reflex suit he'd been wearing had been a hundred percent uncompromised, he would have had a slight chance of making it to shore...but with the burn-throughs from the hits he had taken, that hydrochloric acid would eat him up from the inside out within minutes. I didn't know if anyone, even a Glory Boy, could survive that...but no one I knew would *want* to.

Turning away from the scene, I blinked and shook my head. I was feeling dizzy, and I suddenly realized that my oxygen was running out. I had to get back up onto the pad. Letting loose of the Tahni's belt with one hand, I grabbed his shoulder and pulled myself up far enough to reach the rim of the platform. My vision was beginning to

cloud as I levered myself onto the surface of the pad, and my head was swimming with crazy, disjointed thoughts---all I could think was that it was funny how the 'borg's shoulder felt kind of soft, just like a real, live person's.

I was perilously close to blacking out, but I forced myself back over the rim, struggling to retain enough coherency to grasp the cyborg by the wrist and pull him up. I nearly went off the side myself doing it, but I managed to get one knee underneath me and yank him up beside me as I fell on my back.

The last thing I saw before the darkness closed in on me was his singed, blocky, *ugly* face staring down into mine...and smiling...

\* \* \*

I awoke to a bright light that flooded my vision and the gleaming auburn hair of an angel spilling down above me. This, I decided, had to be Heaven.

"Am I dead?" I asked, the words coming out in a hoarse rasp. Why, I wondered silently, would I have a scratchy throat in Heaven?

"You're not getting away from me that easy, Constable Mitchell," the angel said, her image focusing into one I knew well.

"Hi, baby." I tried to smile at Rachel, but my face seemed stiff, somehow. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, smiling widely, yet also seeming close to tears. "God, Cal, you're a real mess." She lost the battle to hold the tears spilling out of her eye.

"I'll be okay," I assured her. "Takes a lot more than this to kill me."

"That's what I told her, big brother," Pete grinned, kneeling beside



her. Wait a second...*Pete?*

"What the hell are you doing here?" I rose up to an elbow, ignoring the pain that shot through my back. Then I saw Jason Chen standing behind them, wearing a suit of Reflex Armor, an electron beamer held in the crook of his arm. "Jase?" I stared at him dumbly.

"Blame General Murdock," came Deke's voice from my right.

I looked around at him, noticing for the first time that I was laying on the floor of the utility airlock room into which Deke and his people had raided. I assumed they had docked one of the Stealth ships at the lock, probably after Kara had sent them a signal. I felt a gnawing sense of betrayal at just how much in the dark I'd been kept.

"He wanted to keep something in reserve, just in case, and your brother and Inspector Chen insisted."

"So he knew West was the traitor?" I surmised.

"He couldn't be sure," Deke shrugged, lighting up a cigar. "For all he knew, *you* could have been. This way, he had an ace in the hole."

"So why not tell me?" I wanted to know. I found Kara leaning tiredly against a wall, dressed again in her combat suit. "You obviously knew."

"We had to make West believe that we thought Deke was the one," she explained, seeming a bit dispassionate about it all. "Murdock figured that the best way to do that was for you to believe it, too."

I just nodded, not trusting myself to comment on it. Twisting around, I saw the cyborg laid out across the room, with one of the Intell medics leaning over him, running a scan. The charred alloy stub of his shoulder bone seemed obscenely artificial, yet the blood was all

too natural.

"How is he?" I asked Rachel.

"He'll live," she told me, obviously relieved. "He's going to need some extensive treatment, but he should be fine."

"He...he pulled me in here, didn't he?" I realized abruptly.

"It was the least I could do, Constable Mitchell," the 'borg replied unexpectedly from his prone position. "After all, you saved my life, and not without considerable risk to your own."

"Yeah, well," I hemmed uncomfortably, "no big deal."

"You may not realize just how 'big a deal' it is," he disagreed. I could see his face from where I sat, and it looked oddly peaceful. "Unfortunately, I am now confronted by two questions to which I have no immediate answer. What do I do now? I have a rather narrow range of skills, and my very existence is forbidden by your government."

"Well, Trint 'ol pal," Deke drawled, flicking an ash from his cigar, "I think there's about to be a few fundamental changes in our government. And I'm sure General Murdock could use someone with those kind of skills."

"Sure," I muttered, looking across the room where a pair of combat-suited troopers were hauling in Mat's body, sealed in a plastic wrapping. "General Murdock can use anybody."

The Tahni locked eyes with me, and I thought I saw a glint of understanding behind that blackness. Were they real or cybernetic, I wondered. Hell, what did it matter? The soul wasn't in the details. If anyone should know that, it's me.

"No," Trint declared. "That would be much like trading one master for another. I would like to find a place to become my own master."

"You could come with us," Rachel offered. "I mean, if we can go home, if all this works out and we have a home to go back to..."

"Yeah." I surprised myself by the readiness with which I seconded her offer. "You're welcome to come back with us. I don't know if it's what you're looking for, but it's a place to start."

"I thank you," he nodded. "I wish I had met humans such as yourself at the war's end."

"Shit," Deke chuckled. "You probably did---I think I took a shot at you once."

"What's the other question, Trint?" Rachel asked suddenly. "You said there were two."

"Put simply," he told her, "why am I still alive? My jamming device expired nearly fifteen minutes ago, and I saw Damiani escape on his shuttle...he would have been sure to try to activate it before he left orbit." He looked to Deke. "Did your people shoot him down?"

"Hell, no," he spat. "We were damn lucky to get past the picket ships with the Stealth jobs. The Bulldog had four squadrons of missile cutters jump in after us, and I'm not even sure if there's half a squadron left, but they finally took out the Predecessor-technology ships. I doubt they're hunting for shuttles."

"I've got another question that might be pertinent." Kara pushed off from the wall and paced over to us. "Where's Secarius?"

## Interlude: Damiani

Beads of sweat had collected on the shuttle's sensor screen in the few minutes it had taken to achieve orbit, and Damiani took a moment to brush them away. This had been far too close, he realized. He had greatly underestimated General Murdock's ingenuity and resources, and he was going to pay for it. This development would slow down his plans considerably, and perhaps permanently alter them.

Ah, well, he sighed, letting himself rest against the straps of his acceleration couch in the zero gravity. He still retained his position, and, with it, effective control of the Commonwealth Executive. He could put the best possible spin on this on his pet news networks, and possibly salvage the elections through computer simulations of the Predecessors and Skrela. His enemies he could deal with at his leisure.

Things could be much worse.

The Corporate Council Executive Director closed his eyes, attempting to let the tension drain from his body. The shuttle would dock with his cutter in less than an hour, and there was nothing else for him to do until then---except keep trying to transmit the destruct code to Trint's cortex bomb. He wasn't sure if the Tahni had somehow removed the bomb or merely blocked the signal, but it didn't hurt to try. That was one enemy he would like to deal with immediately.

His eyes closed, Damiani couldn't see the slow, gradual movement

out of the shadows behind the cockpit. The compact control room expanded through a narrow corridor to the large equipment bay, now empty but for a pair of sturdy lockers. From behind one of them emerged a dark, sinuous shape, moving silently and stealthfully despite its considerable size. Through the corridor it crept, floating out of the darkened depths of the bay and into the gentle light of the cockpit.

Secarius smiled thinly, baring his fangs at the sight of Damiani floating there with his eyes closed. This was too easy. Faster than an eyeblink, his talons had sliced through the Director's restraining straps, and his tail had wrapped around the man, pinning his arms to his side and lifting him out of the chair to face the former street surgeon.

Damiani sputtered incoherently, eyes wide as baseballs, at the sight of the restructured body that had once been Robert Chang's.

"What...what...what do you want with me?" Damiani stuttered.

"The realization of my destiny," Secarius declared cheerfully. "I created myself to exact revenge upon you. It was rather foolish of you to assume I would settle for anything less."

"I can give you anything you want," his prey protested desperately. "I can get you a new body if you want! Anything!"

"Thanks much, Andre old chap." The creature gently patted Damiani's cheek with a scaly palm. "But I already have a new body waiting back home---I'm turning over something of a new leaf, as it were. Just one little piece of unfinished business before I dispose of this brutishly short existence of mine." He grinned broadly. "Don't

suppose you had time to take advantage of your little technological breakthrough and store a biological insurance policy of your own, eh, Andre?"

The man didn't answer, but Secarius could see in his eyes that he hadn't.

"Pity," the construct tsk'ed. "I'm afraid there won't be enough left of you to clone when I'm finished..."

The cockpit of the shuttle was abruptly filled with ugly, wet sounds and shrill screams that warbled on for long minutes before fading into the silence of space. Outside, the small craft drifted along blissfully, approaching closer to the dark bulk of the cutter waiting in a high orbit. It seemed to be on a nominal docking course---until the engines abruptly flared to life, accelerating the shuttle nose-on into the rear of the starship at several thousand kilometers per second.

The two craft glowed briefly in an expanding, spherical fusion explosion, and then were gone as if they'd never been.

## Chapter Twenty

"You're the quiet one all of a sudden," Rachel murmured, nibbling playfully at my earlobe. I smiled, shifting around on the bed to look at her.

Despite the best efforts of the room's air conditioning, a thin sheen of perspiration glistened on the pale softness of her skin, both from Inferno's intolerable midday heat and from the intensity of our lovemaking. Stray rays of Eridani-light filtered through the closed shades, streaking golden highlights through her auburn hair, gleaming in the azure facets of her eyes.

"Just thinking," I told her, tracing a line across her hip with my fingers. I felt as if I were trying to drink in the whole experience of her: the gentle curves of her breasts, the sweet smell of her hair, the salty taste of the sweat on her skin...all the things I'd thought I lost.

"When are you supposed to see General Murdock?" She asked me, propping herself up on an elbow.

"Whenever he calls me," I shrugged. "He's still interviewing the others, putting together a debriefing for Admiral Sato and the rest of the brass. When this all shakes down, things'll never be the same."

"Will it be better?" Rachel wondered. "Or just different?"

"You'll have to ask Murdock. Hopefully, I can help make it better for us."

"And for our children," she finished for me. My head snapped up, and I wasn't certain I'd heard her right. The shock must have shown

in my eyes, because she nodded, a glow of life in her eyes I hadn't seen in years. "I think it's time," she said, one hand coming up to caress my stubbled cheek, "for us to start our own family. I think it's time we started living like real people...in the present, not the past."

"You know," I said, laughing quietly and pulling her towards me, her lips millimeters from mine, eyes locked together, "I think you're right."

\* \* \*

I paced the corridor like an expectant father, hands stuffed in my pockets, getting more irritated with each step. The clerk at the reception desk eyed me over his computer readout, shaking his head in apparent amusement. I was decidedly unamused by the entire situation. General Murdock had called me here nearly an hour ago, and I was beginning to think he was keeping me waiting as some kind of psychological ploy---except that the Bulldog didn't need to play those kind of games.

I spun at the sound of the General's door hissing open to see Kara McIntire march from his office. Her thoughtful frown melted into a look of surprise as she nearly ran into me. We stood there for a long moment in mutual discomfort and embarrassment, fumbling with words. I hadn't spoken to her since we left Petra, partially out of circumstances---we'd all been in hibernation on the ship, and things had been pretty hectic in the two days since we'd arrived back here on Inferno---and partly out of my choice. I'd spent my little free time---between medical treatment and endless debriefings---with Rachel. I *hadn't* told Rachel about Kara, and I didn't intend to. Maybe that was



dishonest, but I'd rather be dishonest than stupid.

"You okay?" I asked her quietly, still feeling the sting of the broken trust from her and Deke's deception.

"I'm all right," she said. "I...uh..." She motioned back at the office door, which had shut behind her. "I told General Murdock that I wanted to resign from the DSI. He didn't seem to think it was a problem. Actually, he thought it would be better that way." She sucked in a deep breath. "He wanted me to come to work for him, but I'm not sure yet. I told him I'd have to think about it."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I've been talking to Deke," she said, scratching at the back of her left hand. "He's leaving tonight. I thought maybe he could give me a lift out of here, maybe drop me off somewhere I can get work on a ship."

"Good luck." I extended a hand. She looked at it for a second with what could have been regret, then took it.

"To you, too."

Grasping her hand, I felt the resentment and hurt feelings flow out of me, leaving me with only a wearying sense of finality, and the realization that I was going to miss her. I pulled her into an embrace that startled us both, holding her tightly against me with all of the emotion, if none of the passion, we'd felt earlier.

"I'm sorry," I heard her whisper into my ear, along with what could have been a sob. "I'm so sorry, Cal."

"It's all right," I gently stroked her hair. "You did what you had to do."

After a heartbeat, she pushed herself away from me, a hint of moisture in her eyes---or maybe it was my imagination.

"I should go," she said. "Good luck with the General...and try to see Deke before we leave, Cal."

"I promise." I let her slip away from me, not turning to watch her go.

"Sir," said the enlisted man at the reception desk, clearing his throat. "General Murdock will see you now."

The office door slid open and I stepped inside. Murdock's office was a reflection of his personality: tamely yet tastefully decorated, without the flourishes and extravagances common to some high-ranking officers. A Commonwealth seal graced one wall, while the opposite sported a flatscreen view of Earth, and above the mahogany desk floated a hologram of the Cluster similar to the map on his cutter. The only aberration was a Japanese sword mounted on the wall behind his desk. The weapon was well over five hundred years old, but perfectly preserved, its grip wrapped in sharkskin, its sheath polished lacquer. I knew it from the War---its former owner was one of our team, one who didn't make it through the invasion of Tahn-Skyiiah.

Murdock looked up from his computer display at the hiss of the door closing behind me.

"Have a seat, Caleb," he invited, motioning slightly with his head toward the leather-upholstered chair opposite him.

"Thank you for seeing me, sir." I lowered myself into the chair, hearing its wooden frame creak beneath my weight.

"Not at all." He hit a control and the holographic readout of his desk computer faded into the ether. He steepled his hands in front of him, soft brown eyes not betraying a single thought. "You've sacrificed quite a bit in all this, for something that wasn't your battle to fight, and I want you to know I do appreciate it. The debriefings are just about over, so we should be able to send you and your family home within a day or two."

"Yes, sir, that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. You see, this *was* my battle to fight, but I wasn't fighting it for you; or for the Commonwealth; or even for truth, justice and freedom. I was doing it for my family, my friends and my home. And that battle's not over yet." I leaned forward in my chair, fixing him with my stare. "First, I want the Corporates and their mines and their mercenaries and their pet Patrol Inspectors off my planet. Don't bother telling me that's beyond your control, because you know as well as I do that after things fall out, you'll have the Corporate Council's testicles in your tight little hand."

"I doubt you'll be hearing from the Council again," Murdock assured me, not seeming to take my stringent tone as an affront. "They're a headless snake, thanks to Robert Chang. But I'll start the wheels in motion. At the very least," he promised, spreading his hands expressively, "I can make it possible for you to get rid of the Corporate presence without interference from the federal government. Is that all?" Of course that wasn't all. That would've been too easy.

I shook my head. "One more thing. Trint."

"Yes, I've spoken with him," the General informed me. "I understand you offered him a home."

"I gave him my word. If he still wants to go, I'm willing to take him with us when we leave."

"I'm not certain that would be wise," Murdock mused. "There's still much prejudice against the Tahni, especially in the outer colonies. If anyone discovers what he is..."

"God knows if anyone has reason to hate the Tahni in general, and the Imperial Guard in particular, it's me," I reminded him. "I know my people. They learned their lesson in the War. I taught it to them personally."

"Anyway," I got to the point, "you're not keeping him here because you're concerned with his well-being. You think you can use him, and you're sure he's in no position to turn you down."

"I don't believe," he said, enunciating clearly in a tone I recognized from experience as The Last Word, "that I can let you take him away from here."

I settled back in my chair, letting out a breath. This was what I'd been afraid of, but I wasn't a junior officer anymore. I was my own man, with my own responsibilities, and I had to make a stand.

"He won't work for you," I declared. "He's not a robot or an Artificial Intelligence you can reprogram. Damiani was only able to control him by that bomb in his skull, and I'm not sure that would work again even if you were willing to try it. He's no good to you--- you'll just wind up having to kill him."

"That would be my problem," Murdock pointed out, unmoved.

I squared my shoulders, deciding to lay it on the line. "Look, sir, I know you. I know that you can and would have me or any of us 'disappeared' if we become a problem. But I can't let this go. Trint saved Rachel's life, and he saved mine. If I have to put mine on the line for him, I will."

"You feel that strongly about it, do you?" He leaned back in his chair, regarding me evenly, without concern or surprise.

A suspicion slowly crept up my back and whispered in my ear that I was being played like Mozart on a cheap synthesizer. I frowned with the realization, anger battling for supremacy with the relief I felt that there was hope here, after all.

"What do you want?" I asked, the muscles in my face quivering with rage and embarrassment at his manipulation.

"Just a promise, Caleb," he told me, smiling softly. "You have unique abilities and the strength of character to use them to their fullest. There may come a day when I'll need someone with those kind of qualifications---someone with no official ties, no paper trail---for a special favor. It won't be soon, and it won't be often, but the occasion may arrive. I just need your promise that I can count on you."

"That's it, huh?" I shook my head, laughing sharply, bitterly. Another devil, another deal, but still the same choice. If I was lucky, maybe he wouldn't make me sign it in blood.

"All right." I stood abruptly, kicking the chair away from me. "You've got my word." I started to turn for the door, afraid he might want to shake hands or something equally hypocritical, but hesitated

in mid-stride. "Just one thing."

"What's that, Caleb?" He cocked his head curiously towards me.

"When these 'favors' come up," I told him, "keep my family out of it. If any of them so much as stubs their toe and I think you're responsible, you'd better kill me. Because I'll sure as hell be hunting for you."

I strode through the door without a glance back, wishing I'd seen the last of the man, but knowing in my gut I hadn't. Elder Pratt had an old colloquialism appropriate to this situation. Life, he used to say to my father, is a bitch.

\* \* \*

We walked together to the pad where they'd brought the *Dutchman*, just Deke and I, in the comparative cool of the Inferno night. Kara had already boarded the ship, leaving the two of us alone to talk...and to say goodbye.

"So," I tried to fill the uncomfortable silence, "are you headed back to the Pirate Worlds?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "I...I thought I might make a run back home, visit Mom and Dad, now that Murdock's cleared things up for me. After that...well, I got a fast ship and a lot of light years to burn. Maybe I'll do a little scouting, see if I can find the Northwest Passage or something."

"Sounds kind of lonely," I commented as we approached the ship's boarding ramp.

"I'm never at a loss for company," he said, grinning. "And, who knows, maybe I'll drop by your way one of these days, say hi."

We stopped at the base of the ramp, facing each other with so much left to say and no words for it. After a moment, I remembered something. I reached into a pocket and fished out a wad of Tradenotes, handing them to him. He took the bills, face screwing up in confusion as he looked from the notes to me and back again.

"What?" He shook his head.

"That's the twenty bucks I owe you from the War," I told him, grinning broadly. "Just so next time we run into each other, I won't have to hear you bitch about it."

Deke laughed, a soft chuckle that built gradually into a full-throated roar as he leaned back against one of the ramp supports. Catching his breath, he wiped his eyes and tucked the money away.

"Oh, don't worry, Farmboy," he said, straightening. "You know me...I can always find *something* to bitch about."

"I'm counting on it." I slapped him on the shoulder, sending him stepping up the ramp, still chuckling. "Hey," I called to him. He turned about halfway up, eyebrow cocked. "It was fun, wasn't it?"

"Just like old times, bud," he agreed, throwing me a salute. "Just like old times."

Then he turned and walked up that ramp. But I'd see him again...I felt it.

As I jogged away from the ship and past the yellow warning stripes on the surface of the pad, I could see Rachel, Trint, Pete and Jason standing just outside the yawning entrance of the landing bay, waiting for me. Our ride was a few bays over. A converted wartime missile cutter like Deke's and equipped with the same kind of weaponry, it

was a "gift" from Murdock. I wasn't too impressed---I figured he meant for me to utilize it when he called in his "favor." Its only saving grace was that it was about to take us all home. I'd sent word to the General that I wanted to leave immediately, and there'd been no argument. He probably wanted to get me out of there before I changed my mind.

The floodlights of the landing bay backlit me, stretching my elongated shadow toward the others as I walked slowly up to them. Behind me, I heard the ignition of the *Dutchman's* takeoff jets, saw their glow reflected off of the white, buildfoam walls. A hot wind buffeted at my back and dust devils whirled past me as Deke and Kara roared into the night sky, but my eyes were on Rachel.

She let go of Trint's hand and stepped up to meet me halfway, slipping an arm around my waist and walking beside me. Pete leaned against the inside wall of the bay, arms crossed, smiling at me with the infectious enthusiasm of his youth, not caring about the politics or the intrigue, only knowing that his family was back together. Jason's face was a mix of relief that this whole dirty business was over and an undisguised impatience to get home to his wife. Trint stood beside him, towering over all of us, looking little the worse for wear since the Fleet medics and cybertechs fixed him up. The casual human clothes with which he'd been provided seemed curiously out of place on him---like a tutu on a tiger. As for what he was thinking...well, who the hell knows what *any* Tahni is thinking, much less a Tahni cyborg. But I guess I'd have to start learning. He was part of the family now.

"So," Pete said, spreading his hands questioningly, "we going home



or what?"

I thought about that for a second. Were we going home, to the Canaan that I'd grown up on, with its pastoral fields and its wild forests, a place for us to have our children and raise a family---or were we going back to that polluted shithole we left, with its crime and corruption and disillusionment? "No interference from the federal government," Murdock had said. I had a vision of what our cutter's proton cannon could do to the paper-thin mylar of the Corporate's orbital reflectors, smiled.

"Yeah." I answered his question and my own. "We're going home."

*TCN News Instell Report, Dateline: 26 July, 2216, Commonwealth Standard. More fallout from the revelation that the contact with the Predecessors was a hoax perpetrated by the Corporate Council and rogue elements in the DSI. Though President Jameson disavowed any knowledge of the conspiracy, and though there was no attempt to prosecute him or any of the members of his cabinet, the electorate is apparently not so forgiving; in last month's Presidential elections, he was defeated in a landslide by his Solutionist opponent, Cyrilla Hodge.*

*President Hodge's new Director of the DSI, former Fleet General Antonin Murdock, has revealed that the hoax was pulled off through the use of sophisticated bionic constructs and doctored holoprojections. The destruction of Grenada, he has announced, was faked by the sabotaging of the system's Instell satellite to prevent communication. General Murdock has promised long-overdue reforms in the DSI's operations.*

*According to the President's Public Relations Secretary, Julius Marat, there will be no further arrests. Marat has also denied that there is any truth to the rumors that a Predecessor base was discovered by the now-disbanded Corporate Council, and that technology from this base was used in the conspiracy. In other news...*

Following is an excerpt from *Birthright: Book Two, Northwest Passage*, now available on Amazon for Kindle!

## **Prologue**

Conner:

Deke spat the spent butt of his cigar into the damp grass, and ground it under his heel. Squinting against the blue-white star's glare, he took a deep breath of the humid morning air. The tangy aroma of the thick jungle to the west mingled with a hint of the far-off ocean, but neither his inborn olfactory senses nor the cybernetic chemscanners implanted in his head could detect the slightest hint of pollution, the barest vestiges of human industrial civilization. This was the only slice of the planet that could honestly be called habitable for unprotected humans, and it was a vanishingly slim slice at that. If

the whole world had been this hospitable, the place would have been packed with colonists.

The only visible proof man had ever set foot on this world was his own ship, its delta-winged bulk pressing into the soft earth of the valley floor, steam still hissing off its cooling metal surfaces. A converted missile cutter from the last war, the ship still retained its two-tone camouflage scheme---sky-grey on its belly, olive drab on the upper hull---interrupted only by the hand-scrawled red of the ship's name: *Dutchman*.

For all he could see, his ship could be the first human landing on this planet...and, considering his cargo, he should have been grateful for the isolation. But there was something about this that he just didn't like. He pulled his sidearm, checking its load, knowing he was being a paranoid but not caring. His contact had five minutes before the No-Later-Than time, and if the man didn't make it by then, he was out of here---not a minute more.

The ship's sensors whispered a warning to his implanted wetware and his eyes snapped to the horizon and the flyer coming in low, just above the tree line. He'd been expecting it, but he had the ship's weapons systems target it anyway, even as he sent the recognition signal.

*Signal received and identified*, the ship's computer told him.

So, it was them. He left the weapons armed and kept his gun in his hand as he watched the boxy ducted-fan hovercraft descend in a tightening spiral to touch down only twenty meters away. The whine of the hopper's belly fans hadn't quite died when the aircraft's side

hatch popped open and a man emerged. Tall and gangly, he had the look of someone born and raised on Mars or one of the other low-gravity colony worlds, with an elongated, horsey face and jet-black hair.

Deke had never met him, but a file had been supplied by the middleman in this deal, and he took the moment to review the pertinent facts. His name was Kane Xiang, or so the file would have had Deke believe, and he ran an iridium mine on Sipapu, a squatter colony on the fringes of the Pirate Worlds---those lawless, nearly worthless systems on the inner edge of the Cluster that rejected Commonwealth rule.

Officially, colonization was forbidden in the systems directly bordering Pirate Space. But with the Cluster's more accessible colonies being quickly gobbled up in the Expansion that had followed the Second Interstellar War, many dissatisfied adventurers and restless entrepreneurs were venturing to the proscribed systems to try their hand at mining or agriculture.

Only one problem with that: since the colonies weren't recognized by the Commonwealth government, they received no protection from the Patrol or the Rangers---and the pirate cabals knew it. This left the squatters with the choice of either hiring mercenaries for their defense or doing the job themselves.

Xiang's people had chosen the latter alternative, and that was where Deke came in. The hold of his ship was packed with a pair of military-grade proton cannons suitable for mounting on any spacecraft, along with the sensor package and Artificial Intelligence

programs to run it. All of which was stolen, all of which was illegal for civilians to possess, and all of which was illegal to sell to an unenfranchised colony.

All of which didn't mean shit to Deke.

"You're Conner," the man accused, striding down the ramp and approaching Deke. A quick scan showed Deke he wasn't armed and wasn't packing any obvious physical augmentation.

"And you're Xiang," Deke returned, shoving his sidearm into its holster. "Hope you've got loading equipment in there," he went on, nodding at the hopper, "'cause you folks aren't paying me enough to haul this shit out on my back."

"No problem." Xiang fished in his pants pocket and came up with a crystal dataspike, tossing it to Deke. "Go ahead and check that out while I go grab the powerlift."

Deke frowned at him as he disappeared back into the hold of the aircraft. He'd been dealing with the squatter colonies for a while now, and he hadn't yet met one of the raggedy-assed paranoids that didn't want to go over the cargo with an electron microscope before they forked over the money. Yet a quick scan of the spike with his neurolink showed that it indeed held the two hundred K in Corporate scrip that was the agreed-upon price for the weapons.

He tucked the spike into a pouch on his gun-belt, shaking his head. There was no sign of any trouble, and he couldn't start shooting his customers just because he had a bad feeling---business might start to decline. So he just waited and watched as the hopper's cargo door fell open with a metallic groan.

Xiang clomped out of the aircraft's cargo hold wearing the faded yellow bulk of an old industrial exoskeleton, its aging servos whining in protest as he brought it over the uneven ground between the two vehicles. Deke chuckled softly as the man approached him.

"That thing looks like it's older than I am," he commented.

"We don't get much in the way of equipment out here." Xiang smiled apologetically through the exoskeleton's safety cage, struggling with the machine's controls. "This old girl's held together with spit and good wishes."

"Aren't we all?" Deke mused. "Follow me."

The ramp to the cargo bay yawned open from the ship's belly, revealing the insulated hold and the half-dozen durasteel containers which contained the components of the proton accelerators.

"You want to inspect the goods?" Captain Conner asked the colonist, leading him up into the bay. "You choose the box and I'll pop it open for you."

"I'll check it out back in the hopper," Xiang told him. "I've got a diagnostic scanner in the hold."

Deke frowned. There it was again, that faint odor of something rotten. It wasn't so much that Xiang wasn't inspecting the cargo on his ship---God knows, there were all types out here, and maybe he wasn't the shrewdest businessman. No, it was the fact that a group of half-assed squatters who couldn't even afford a first-class powerloader had a full diagnostic scanner in the hold of his hopper---a device which cost nearly as much as one of the bootleg proton cannons.

It still wasn't enough to make him push the panic button, but it

was damned strange. He shook the feeling off. If anything happened, he'd deal with it. He hadn't survived in the business this long without living through a handful of attempted double-crosses: he was confident that there was nothing this Xiang could throw at him that he couldn't handle. One hole card he'd enjoyed for a long time was that while he usually knew who he was dealing with, the opposition never knew who *they* were dealing with.

Deke stepped out of the way as Xiang hauled the first of the containers forward, the oversized footpads of the exoskeleton scraping against the surface of the ramp with a sound that set the pilot's teeth on edge. He had barely made it out of the hold when something crackled and popped in the machine's hip and the exoskeleton froze up with a grinding squeal.

"Shit!" Xiang spat, slamming a fist against the padded armrest. "This Goddamned thing's primary motivator's shorted out again."

"Let me take a look at it," Deke offered with a sigh, holstering his sidearm. He stepped around to the rear of the machine, popped the access hatch into the guts of the electric motor, and was rewarded immediately by a cloud of white smoke and the unmistakable stench of burning insulation. "Goddamn, this thing *is* an antique," he muttered, using the thermal optics implanted behind his corneas to trace the short. "Here's your trouble," he announced, feeling on his gun-belt for the all-purpose tool he kept in a pouch there. "Just be a second..."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the motor blew up in his face and the world was suddenly several different shades of

black...

\* \* \*

Deke swam through a sea of darkness, clawing his way back to consciousness with but one thought: this was impossible, Impossible, IMPOSSIBLE, GODDAMN IMPOSSIBLE!!!

The Glory Boys, the elite team of augmented commandos he'd fought with during the war, were not physically capable of losing consciousness except by death or voluntary sleep. Sonic stunners and microwave disruptors could cause them pain and confusion, various chemicals or electric shock devices could short-circuit their organic nervous system, but nothing short of actual physical force could disrupt the heavily-shielded superconductive fibers that connected their implant computers to their byomer muscle augments. Their auxiliary organs could supply them with a few minutes of extra oxygen, and their computer-to-brain neurolink could prevent them from blacking out due to shock unless they permitted it to stop the pain of an injury. And the only way to disconnect the neurolink was to rip it out of his skull.

So why, for the first time in two decades, was his headcomp silent?

He opened his eyes.

"You're shitting me!" he blurted.

"Hi, Deke," Kara McIntire said, smiling broadly.

Deke tried closing his eyes and opening them again, but the lean, attractive face, the piercing green eyes and the spiky, short-cut hair just wouldn't go away. He looked around and saw that he was



lying in a military-style bunk in a small, sterile, white-walled room with no windows and a single door. He wasn't restrained and he was still dressed in his own clothes, though a quick pat-down revealed to him that all the hidden weapons had been cleaned out, right down to the monowire garrote wrapped in a special lining of his jacket sleeve. He tried to extend the talons mounted on the bones of his forearms, but received not a whisper of response from his headcomp.

God *damn* it.

"Where am I?" he asked her, sitting up. "And no offense, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"You're on the Patrol cutter *Kraken*," she confirmed his worst fears. "And I'm here to give you a way out."

"Since when do you work for the Patrol?" he wanted to know. Of course, what he really wanted to know was what the hell was happening with his augmentation, but something in him prevented him from coming out and asking.

"Oh, I don't," she assured him. "I work for General Murdock now."

"Oh, shit," he mumbled.

General Antonin Murdock had been the CO of Deke's commando team during the war. His most recent run-in with the man had involved an apocalyptic confrontation with the monopolistic might of the Corporate Council, the result of which was the collapse of the Council and the sweeping under the rug of a shitload of advanced alien technology. The man had more power than ever now, and the last thing Deke had wanted was to become involved with him again.

"Cheer up, Deke," she urged. "Cooperate and you get everything back---including a guarantee that you'll never have to worry about the Patrol again."

"And if I don't?" he wondered. "Off to a reformatory?"

"Not my call," she admitted, frowning in discomfort. "But unlikely, considering how much you know."

"So I'll be 'disappeared,' huh?" He grinned lopsidedly.

"Murdock never was much of a sentimentalist. Well, at least I know where I stand." He regarded her carefully. "What if I said I'd downloaded my memory of what happened on Petra onto several dataspikes being held by friends in the Worlds? And that if I fail to contact them for a certain period of time, those recordings will be hacked into a Commonwealth Instel Newsnet broadcast for all to see?"

"Well then," she replied with brutal honesty, "I'm fairly certain your memories would be ripped out by a psycheprobe and those friends would be hunted down and killed within a week."

"Just curious." Deke said, spreading his hands innocently. He sighed heavily, settling back on the cot with his head on his hands. "All right, what does that old bastard want from me?"

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